

Christian Doctrine:

2nd Edition

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As of the date of publishing, this book can be downloaded for free from the following locations:

<<http://doctrinebook.com>>

<<https://archive.org/details/christian-doctrine>>

Preface to the Second Edition

This second edition of Christian Doctrine contains many revisions and additions to the first edition. Thus, I encourage the audience to read the entirety of the second edition and to do so in the order of its presentation because the concepts in it are built upon each other. What has not changed, though, is the focus upon the covenant truth and its implications.

The purpose of this book is to present the doctrine of Christianity as God has revealed it to me. Of course, many books have been written on the same topic, but what sets this book apart from most others is that the description of Christian doctrine in it is largely influenced by the context of Near Eastern culture.ⁱⁱ The educational journey that God has led me upon over many years, and that continues to this day, has included extensive study of that culture, as described by many writers, so that I can discern how it helps to explain the content of the Bible.

Subsequent to the publishing of this book on 07/19/2025, I have made updates to it. The latest version of the text is always available at doctrinebook.com, and the list of updates made since the original publishing date can be found at updatesdoctrinebook.com.

What is Doctrine?

The best starting point for this discussion of Christian doctrine is to define the word “doctrine.” Doctrine simply refers to the principles of a given religion,ⁱⁱⁱ which in this case is Christianity. Of course, the Bible is the primary text of Christianity, but the Bible does not present the substance of Christian doctrine in a systematic, topical way. Rather, the Bible is a collection of commands, poetry, parables, letters, and narratives that do contain the substance of Christian doctrine, but the description of any one aspect of it is spread out over the entire Bible. For instance, if you want to learn about the Christian perspective of forgiveness, that perspective is in the Bible, but there is no concise section or chapter that specifically describes the totality of forgiveness from the Christian perspective.

Any book on the topic of Christian doctrine is an attempt to describe the aspects of Christian faith in a systematic, topical presentation. This book is most certainly **not** a replacement for reading the Bible but is rather a tool to help the reader in his study of the Bible. While the Bible does not present Christian doctrine systematically, the doctrine of Christianity is assuredly systematic – that

is, it is composed of set principles and patterns. It is my hope that this book will both educate the reader about the principles and patterns of Christian doctrine and help him to recognize them in the Bible.

What is the Near East?

The “Near East” refers to a region of Western Asia and North Africa that includes modern-day countries such as Israel, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon, but that list is by no means comprehensive. The term is loosely based upon the idea that the “East,” as a region, refers to Asia, and the countries comprising the “Near East” represent the portion of Asia **nearest** to the “Western world,” which includes Europe and North America. The “Far East” refers to countries farthest from the Western world, such as China and Japan. The “Middle East,” which includes countries such as Iraq and Saudi Arabia, is also considered to be part of the Near East from a cultural point of view, as are parts of North Africa, such as Egypt. Indeed, the term “Near East” refers to a grouping of people that share cultural characteristics in addition to geographical characteristics. For some of these countries, we could also call this culture by the appellation “Arab,” but I generally refrain from using that label because in modern times, it carries strong political connotations that are irrelevant to the study of Christianity.

Why Study Near Eastern Culture?

Almost all the writers and characters of the Bible are natives of Near Eastern lands and culture. Certainly, the Israelites of the Old Testament and Jesus and His disciples are all from the Near East. Even the apostle Paul, though he spent most of his Christian career preaching in the Greco-Roman lands, is originally from what is today Turkey, which is a Near Eastern country, and he studied in Israel as a rabbi.^{iv}

Near Eastern culture not only has specific customs and idioms but also specific psychology, philosophy, and rhetoric, all of which are reflected in the Bible. Of course, the people of the Near East are not perfectly homogeneous, but study of them as a whole provides valuable context. Indeed, the intended meaning of many Biblical passages cannot be discerned without a proper understanding of this Near Eastern cultural context.

Of course, the events of the Bible, and the recording of those events in writing, occurred thousands of years ago, so how can relatively modern descriptions of Near Eastern culture be relevant to the study of the Bible? Well, praise God for the fact that one of the hallmark features of Near Eastern

culture is a prioritization of tradition.^v In that culture, changes to communication style, philosophy, psychology, and even many of the activities of daily life come only at a glacial pace, and that which was believed, said, and practiced by one's ancestors is considered to be valuable and right **because** it was believed, said, and practiced by one's ancestors. More specifically, the elements of the culture are considered by its members to be valuable because they believe that it was God Who delivered them to their earliest ancestor.^{vi} As Abraham Rihbany, the esteemed scholar of Near Eastern culture, writes, "to the Oriental [Rihbany's term for a Near Easterner] life is neither an evolution nor an achievement, but an inheritance."^{vii} As a result, relatively contemporary Near Eastern culture, particularly that found in the rural areas, is very similar, if not identical, to the culture expressed in the Bible.^{viii}

In summary, the study of Near Eastern culture is relevant to the interpretation of the Bible precisely because the Bible is a very Near Eastern work of non-fiction literature.

What About Islam?

Some people may object that study of Near Eastern culture is irrelevant to Christian doctrine because of the prevalence of Islam in that region. Admittedly, the majority of the people in the Near East are Muslims, but there is a sizable minority of Christians in that region as well. More to the point though, it is important to remember that Muhammad, the founder of Islam, was not even born until AD 570,^{ix} so Islam is a relatively new system of belief. Christianity predates it by approximately 540 years, and Judaism, upon which Christianity is built, predates it by thousands of years.

Thus, Near Eastern culture existed long before Islam arrived. Given the prioritization of tradition in that culture, the impact of Islam upon the aspects of that culture are minimal, and I would say the same thing about Christianity and Judaism. Put another way, the religions of the Near East largely reflect and express the preexisting culture of that area rather than the principles of the religions changing that culture.

Where is all the Scripture?

One thing you will immediately notice about this book is that the direct quotations from Scripture are probably fewer than you would expect from a book such as this, and that is a purposeful choice. Much of the problem of modern Christianity is that people select individual verses or passages

from the Bible and attempt to discern doctrinal meaning from those narrow selections alone. Such an approach will inevitably lead to misinterpretations because of the style of rhetoric used in the Near East.

A Near Eastern man makes heavy use of figurative language, and he will change or ignore factual details if they do not support the meaning he intends to communicate.^x Indeed, Near Eastern writers and speakers formulate their words in order to convey a specific point or concept to a specific audience without any consideration for how those words can be misinterpreted, contradict a different point or concept, or be understood in any way other than that which they intend.^{xi} They have that freedom of expression because in Near Eastern culture, the onus is upon the listener to understand the speaker's **intended** meaning. It is not the speaker's responsibility to ensure the listener's correct understanding of his meaning. If the listener misunderstands, it is considered his fault, not the speaker's fault. As Abraham Rihbany writes:

"A Syrian's ['Syrian' is a term used here to refer to people of the Near Eastern culture] chief purpose in a conversation is to convey an impression by whatever suitable means, and not to deliver his message in scientifically accurate terms. He expects to be judged not by what he says, but by what he means. He does not expect his hearer to listen to him with the quizzical courtesy of a 'cool-headed Yankee,' and to interrupt the flow of conversation by saying, with the least possible show of emotion, 'Do I understand you to say,' etc. No; he piles up his metaphors and superlatives, reinforced by a theatrical display of gestures and facial expressions, in order to make the hearer *feel* his meaning."^{xii}

Furthermore, to quote George Lipsky on the topic of the Arab style of communication:

"The skillful use of language is a value in itself, affecting both the user and the audience; the ability to make the most effective use of the highly stylized forms of speech valued by the Arabs is a major social asset. Language style becomes as effective as logic. Each element of a literary product is regarded as an individual experience: a line in a poem need have no immediately obvious relation to the whole, and sometimes even the words themselves seem to lose all but aesthetic significance. Within the limits of conventionally approved subject matter, appreciation of sheer rhetorical eloquence transcends any concern for internal coherence and unity."^{xiii}

"An educated Arab will use a great number of quotations from the Koran and classical literature, both prose and poetry. A high value is placed on the ability to render such quotations, and a quotation is often taken as the final authority in an argument. Proverbs, both classical and colloquial, are also frequently used and highly valued.

Gestures, facial expressions, and intonation are an important aspect of communication among Arabs as they are among all peoples. Upper-class men try to appear less emotional in speech than women, but in general, voices are loud, and an Arab, really speaking with little emotion, may often appear to be angry or excited to a Westerner.”^{xiv}

Of course, for Near Eastern Jews and Christians, the quotations from Holy Scripture would not be from the Koran but from the Tanakh and the Christian Bible, respectively.

A final important perspective on Near Eastern communication comes from Sania Hamady. In this quote, she writes about Arab people speaking in Arabic, but her insights are more applicable to the Near Easterner’s style of communication, regardless of the language he uses:

Thoughts expressed in Arabic are generally vague and hard to pin down. [...] Furthermore, it is possible to understand an ordinary Arabic sentence as a whole; but to understand it in a manner that fits all the details into a clear and well-integrated picture is not always easy. However, if the Arab understands the general meaning or significance of a sentence or paragraph, with all its effective colorings and intuitive revelations, he will think that he understands it perfectly and accurately.^{xv}

In short, the Bible must be studied and considered as a whole if we are to discern the writers’ intended meanings, for we need as much context as possible to decipher the multitude of figurative language, cultural allusions, and exaggerations used by the Near Eastern characters and writers of the Bible.^{xvi} Not to mention, as modern readers of the Bible, we do not have the advantage of seeing and interpreting the facial expressions, gestures, and tones of voice employed by the speakers recorded in the Bible, so again, we need as much context as possible in order to compensate for that disadvantage. Furthermore, the Bible was authored by Near Easterners who, in many cases, expected an audience that would have an intimate familiarity with Near Eastern culture and rhetorical style. Thus, every piece of Scripture can only be accurately interpreted by analyzing it within the context of the entirety of the Bible and Near Eastern culture and rhetorical style.

Chapter 1: Why Believe in God?

Christianity presupposes the existence of God, so before describing the principles of Christian doctrine, I must make an argument for the existence of God. Some Christians would say that they believe God exists because the Bible portrays God as being real, but such an argument is disingenuous because Christians believe that the Bible's authority is founded upon it being the word of God. We are not convincing when we justify our belief in the existence of God solely upon what we believe to be God's own assertion of His existence.

If we are to have a persuasive argument for the existence of God, it has to come from human experience, for whether it is wise to do so or not, we instinctively trust our sensory perceptions, above all else, to define reality and truth.

What is a God?

To make an argument for the existence of God, I must first define what a god is. How do we define the nature of a god? A god is more powerful than human beings, but power alone cannot define a god. A tornado is more powerful than a human being, but we would not call it a god. A god is wiser and more knowledgeable than human beings, but knowledge and wisdom alone are not gods. The Internet arguably contains all the knowledge and wisdom ever discovered by humanity – a quantity of knowledge and wisdom that surpasses the intellect of any one human being – yet we would not call the Internet a god.

God is Spirit

Jesus says in John 4:24, "*God is spirit.*" To be interpreted fully and correctly, that statement needs to be considered within the context in which it was spoken, but nevertheless, even by itself, that statement gives a good starting point in defining a god. We often think of a "spirit" as being a ghost, like a cartoon ghost, but in the Bible, the word "spirit" usually just refers to a perspective.^{xvii,xviii} A spirit is a way of understanding the circumstances of life. For instance, if you become angry because someone insults you, then you have a spirit of anger, which is to say that you have a perspective that is composed of anger. In that spirit, you have a negative perspective of the person who insulted you, and it is likely that your perspective of other aspects of your life will

become negative as well. Furthermore, a spirit is a perspective that its possessor seeks to manifest in sensory existence, for spirit is the motivation of behavior. Returning to the previous example, you may manifest your spirit of anger by insulting the person in return, complaining about him to other people, refusing to speak with anyone else for the rest of the day, etc.

The phrase “*God is spirit*” does not mean that God is just a perspective but, rather, that He is a conscious being with a particular perspective, and He uses His infinite knowledge, wisdom, and power to manifest His perspective in sensory existence. This is what is meant by the “Holy Spirit.” It is simply the unchanging perspective of God. It is the unchanging understanding that God has of all things, and He puts that understanding into sensory manifestation in the world. The Holy Spirit is not a being or power in and of itself but is rather only the perspective of God that He effectuates in the world by means of His power. Therefore, people who have the Holy Spirit as their own spirit – that is, people who have the same perspective of things as has God – are often empowered by God to fulfill His purposes precisely because they know and seek to fulfill those purposes.^{xix}

If “*God is spirit*” and if spirit is the perspective that one works to put into sensory manifestation, then we should be able to discern the existence of God from our recognition of the manifestation of God’s Spirit in this world. Therefore, the proof of the existence of God is to be found in human experience. Does the combined experience of all humanity, throughout time, indicate the existence of a supernatural – indeed, a superhuman – knowledge and power being used to manifest a consistent perspective? At this point, we are not concerned with what God’s perspective of things is but only with the empirical evidence to prove the following hypothesis: the sum total of human experience is greater than the sum total of human knowledge and human power used to manifest human perspectives. If that hypothesis is proven, then it would indicate the existence of a god. Now, let us examine human experience in order to prove that hypothesis.

Life is Random?

An atheist is “a person who does not believe in the existence of a god or any gods.”^{xx} Atheists argue that life is simply the product of random interactions of atoms and that Earth is simply one of the few places, or the only place, where such random interactions resulted in the creation of life. This is a human perspective that is devoid of any belief in a god, and we must determine if human experience proves that perspective to be true.

In just the Milky Way galaxy, which contains Earth, there are an estimated 300 million planets that are potentially habitable,^{xxi} yet we have no conclusive proof of life on any of them, except Earth.

This means that life, especially intelligent life on par with humanity, must be incredibly rare in the universe, if not entirely unique to Earth.

By the theory of random creation, life must only be the result of an incalculable number of interactions of atoms occurring in very specific ways. However, if life is so rare – i.e. if it requires so many random interactions to happen in specific ways – then it must be incredibly fragile as well.^{xxii,xxiii} Namely, if even one of those required interactions is absent or fails in any way, then life cannot exist. Therefore, the human/atheist perspective considers the Earth and life on it to be only a remotely possible anomaly.

That perspective also considers the endurance of life on Earth a remotely possible anomaly. Nevertheless, in 2021, there were approximately 7.91 billion people on Earth, approximately 69.25 million died, and approximately 133.97 million were born.^{xxiv} This means that less than 1% of the human population died in 2021. If life is so fragile, how is it that over 99% of us are surviving from one year to the next? Moving from a macro level to a micro level, consider your own life. How many mistakes can you recall making when faced with major decisions in your life? How many potentially harmful, if not deadly, mistakes have you made in your life out of sheer momentary stupidity or foolhardiness? Most people can recall several. Of those major mistakes, we typically realize just how close we came to disaster, and yet disaster did not occur. Through some unexpected and unlikely combination of interventions and circumstances, you were spared the full negative effects of your mistake. Atheists would consider these events to be the product of random chance – that is, of luck.

Admittedly, the observational data of human experience can be explained by either the hypothesis that a god exists or the hypothesis that life is entirely a random creation. We are left then to examine the observational data and determine which hypothesis is more likely to be accurate. This is the nature of empirical proof: the collection and interpretation of observational data in order to form a conclusion that explains all of the data. In the foregoing exposition, the human/atheist hypothesis for the creation of life is shown to be inherently dubious, for it considers the existence of a planet thriving with human life, both at the individual and species level, to be an extremely remote possibility. If the hypothesis itself deems the empirical evidence at hand to be extremely unlikely to exist in the first place, then why should we use that hypothesis to explain the existence of the evidence?

Life is the Creation of God?

Now, consider the alternate hypothesis that Earth and all life on it are the purposeful creation of a God, Who is infinitely powerful and knowledgeable and values life, particularly human life. That hypothesis explains why the Earth not only supports life but also allows it to thrive here, and it also explains how you have avoided calamity resulting from your own mistakes. The existence of an Almighty God that values human life and so intervenes for the welfare of humanity explains these things quite easily.

Remember, though, that God is not just raw power or knowledge but also a conscious Spirit – that is, a consistent perspective that its possessor seeks to manifest sensorially. The evidence that we have – that is, human life thriving on a macro and micro level on Earth – overwhelmingly supports the hypothesis claiming the existence of an Almighty God, Who values human life.

Again, we have to settle for believing that which we discern to most likely be true. The hypothesis of random creation considers the existence of human life, not to mention its abundance, to be extremely unlikely, but the hypothesis of creation as the result of a God Who values humanity considers the existence and abundance of human life to be not only a possibility but the **only** possibility. By definition, an Almighty God has nothing to restrain Him from fulfilling His desires, so if His desire is for human life to thrive, then that is the guaranteed outcome. The human/atheist hypothesis makes human life an extremely remote possibility whereas the Christian hypothesis makes human life, and the proliferation of it, a guarantee. Which hypothesis do you believe best fits the evidence at hand?

Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

The human/atheist hypothesis is alluring to many people because it provides a ready answer to that nagging question. To the atheist mind, bad things happen to good people simply randomly – i.e. the product of bad luck. Furthermore, atheists argue that the “bad luck” people experience disproves the Christian hypothesis because a God Who values human life would not allow bad things to happen to any human being.

Later in this book, I discuss the reason for hardship in the human experience according to Christian doctrine,^{xxv} but for the moment, we are only making an empirical analysis of the existence of God. Even absent Christian doctrine, the God hypothesis is still more convincing than the atheist

hypothesis simply because human life more often thrives than it experiences calamity. The atheist hypothesis may provide an easy explanation for negative experience, but it also makes positive experience only equally as likely to occur as negative experience since both are asserted to be the result of random chance.

However, the empirical data on human experience is overwhelmingly of a positive nature. As stated earlier, over 99% of us are surviving from one year to the next. On a micro level, I also think that the majority of people would say that the experience of their lives has been more positive than negative. Even when you encounter people who are currently miserable, what do they often say? “Things used to be better.” “Things used to be good.” “I was happy before.”

Thus, even if, at a purely empirical level, we are forced to conclude that neither the human/atheist hypothesis nor the God hypothesis fully explains **all** the empirical evidence, the God hypothesis is still a more complete explanation of the empirical evidence than is the atheist hypothesis.

Why Believe in Yahweh?

Even if you come to the conclusion, as I do, that God exists, why should we also conclude that Yahweh, the God described in the Bible, is that God? Quite simply, Yahweh, as He is described in the Bible, fits the empirical evidence of human experience. The Bible describes the God Yahweh as showing perfect and consistent love for people, and we judge that description to be accurate because we have experienced Yahweh’s consistent, perfect love ourselves. The Bible and its description of God – i.e. His Spirit and behavior – are credible precisely because they accord with the human experience of life. This is why I believe that Yahweh is the God that exists.

Chapter 2: Being a Christian

What is the Purpose and Benefit of Being a Christian?

This is what we really want to know before we even study Christian doctrine or decide to be Christians. What is the goal of it? What do we get out of it? While you may have heard different things about the benefits of Christian faith, compare the rumors and the facts below.

Rumor	Fact
Being a Christian makes God love you.	God already loves you permanently and perfectly regardless of your beliefs.
Being a Christian makes God forgive your sins.	From the very beginning of our existence, God forgave all the sins that all human beings would ever commit regardless of our beliefs.
Being a Christian makes God offer you eternal life with Him in Heaven.	God offers eternal life with Him to all people regardless of our beliefs.

Christianity, Christian faith, and the benefits that you receive from being a Christian have nothing to do with altering God's perspective of you because that perspective was permanently established when God created humanity. God's love, forgiveness, and offer of eternal life with Him for all humanity are preexisting and permanent.

You may be wondering, then, what the point is of having Christian faith if all of these benefits already exist for all humanity regardless of our beliefs. Well, the purpose and benefit of Christian faith is having the peace of mind that comes from being certain and assured that God already and permanently loves you, has forgiven your sins, judges you to be perfectly honorable and as you ought to be in your fundamental nature, and welcomes you to eternal life with Him. To be perfectly clear, whether you are a Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, agnostic, atheist, or an adherent of any other system of belief or no system of belief, God has always and will always love you, forgive your sins, judge you to be perfectly honorable and as you ought to be in your

fundamental nature, and welcome you to eternal life with Him in Heaven. God's perspective of all people is fixed and unchanging, and the perspective of any given human being is the only variable. Christian faith gives you the certainty and assurance that you already and forever possess those aforementioned benefits from God. Therefore, Christianity, as a system of belief, is the basis upon which you can have ultimate peace of mind.

Having that peace of mind, which comes from having sincere Christian faith, is what Jesus calls entering "God's Kingdom" or the "Kingdom of Heaven."^{xxvi} Jesus uses this metaphor because it alludes to the peace of mind that comes from being a resident of an ideal earthly kingdom. As such a resident, a man feels physically secure by virtue of the king's strength, he feels cared for by the king, and he takes satisfaction in the fact that the king is the ideal model of what it means to be a resident of that kingdom. The resident believes that the king represents the fundamental nature of every resident of that kingdom. Accordingly, the resident takes comfort in the fact that the king must consider him to be perfectly honorable and as he ought to be in his fundamental nature because both he and the king share the same fundamental nature. Furthermore, believing all those things to be permanent, the resident is also confident that the king wants him to dwell in his kingdom permanently.

What do I have to do to be a Christian?

Being a Christian, in its most basic definition, means believing – i.e. having faith^{xxvii,xxviii} – that the example and teachings of Jesus Christ are accurate representations of God's Spirit. Put another way, having Christian faith is having a spirit of belief in the truth that God established and upholds and that Jesus manifests in His words, deeds, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. That truth is the subject of the Bible and this book.

Being a Christian is a matter of what you believe, not what you do. However, the caveat to that statement is that if you truly believe something, then you will naturally express that belief in your words and actions. You will naturally behave in accordance with that which you believe because spirit motivates behavior.

Who was Jesus Christ, and what did He Teach?

This natural next question does not have a simple answer. Ultimately, this entire book is about Who Jesus was and what He manifested and taught in His words, deeds, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. For now, suffice it to say that Jesus was a man who lived in Israel in the 1st century AD. He was Jewish, by faith and ethnicity, which means that He was a member of the ethnic group of Near Eastern people who worshiped their God – the One, True God – known formally as “Yahweh.” Jesus believed that the Jewish faith in Yahweh – known as Judaism or Yahwism – had become corrupted over time, and He sought to restore it to what it was originally meant to be. In the course of His ministry, He taught people, worked miracles, was executed, was resurrected from death, and ascended to Heaven in His living body.

Chapter 3: The Creation Story

The Importance

The Creation story, as contained in Genesis 1:1 – 2:25, is important not only as a description of the origin of things but also, and more importantly, because in it is the entirety of Christian doctrine. How can that be when Jesus, the founder of Christianity, does not appear until the Gospel of Matthew? Well, everything in the Bible past Genesis 2:25 is written entirely for the purpose of convincing humanity again of the truth that Adam and Eve know prior to their corruption by sin. None of the Biblical figures – Moses, Jesus, Paul, etc. – preach anything that is substantially new. Their lives, words, and deeds only express the truth that was originally established in the Creation story.

This is why John 1:1 states, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*” The “Word” refers to the truth that is contained in the Creation story, which is why the “Word” is present “*in the beginning.*” Furthermore, the Gospel writer identifies Jesus with that “Word” simply because Jesus manifests that same truth in His words, deeds, life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

Some people object to the Creation story in the Bible because of scientific evidence indicating such things as the Big Bang, the age of the Earth being in the billions of years, dinosaurs, evolution, etc. Fair enough, but even if the Creation story is not accurate according to our modern, scientific perspective, it is nevertheless doctrinally accurate. Namely, Genesis chapters 1 and 2 describe the nature of God, humanity, the earth, and evil. Those two chapters describe the Spirit – i.e. the Perspective – that God has and that we are meant to have, and Genesis chapter 3 describes the corruption of that right spirit in us. Remember that the Bible is very much a Near Eastern composition, and the Near Eastern writer seeks “to convey an impression by whatever suitable means, and not to deliver his message in scientifically accurate terms.”^{xxix}

Genesis 1:1-2

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¹In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ²The earth was formless and empty. Darkness was on the surface of the deep and God's Spirit was hovering over the surface of the waters.

This passage begins with the statement “in the beginning,” which often causes confusion because people will ask, “what was God doing before He created the earth?” The Creation story and the Bible as a whole do not address that question simply because the focus of the Bible is upon the relationship between God and humanity. Thus, it only makes sense that the Bible begins with the **beginning** of that relationship.

Verse 2 gives a description of existence prior to the creation of the earth. It states that “*the earth was formless and empty. Darkness was on the surface of the deep and God's Spirit was hovering over the surface of the waters.*” Another translation for “*the deep*” is an “abyss,”^{xxxii} and that is really the meaning intended here. Prior to God’s creative work, existence is a vast, unfathomable darkness and emptiness, which is portrayed here as an ocean. Of course, we modern Western people would argue that the abyss is not empty if it contains water, and a better description of an abyss is the vacuum of outer space. However, Moses, the author of Genesis, evidently has no knowledge of outer space and the emptiness of its vacuum. The best analogy that he can think of for the abyss that he wishes to describe is an unending, dark sea. The impression that he intends to convey to the reader is an existence that is inhospitable to human life, and the imagery and implication of being stranded in an endless ocean certainly creates that impression.

Furthermore, Moses’ lack of awareness of outer space explains why he can both identify a time before the creation of the earth but then also describe that time as being when “*the earth was formless and empty.*” To the modern Western mind, Moses contradicts himself, for how can the earth have any characteristics if it is not yet created? The discrepancy is simply the result of Moses having no intellectual means for describing the non-existence of the earth without still referring to the earth because he does not know of any sensory realm outside of the earth. We would have similar trouble describing the non-existence of the universe, for we do not know of any sensory realm that is outside of the universe.

Moses’ description of the abyss is meant to be a metaphor for the nature of evil, for he desires to portray evil as emptiness, nothingness, and that which is inhospitable to human life. By implicit contrast, substance – i.e. the opposite of nothingness – represents goodness. Furthermore, verse 2

describes God's Spirit as "*hovering over the surface of the waters.*" God's Spirit – that is, God's Perspective – hovers over the abyss because it is separate from the abyss. It is separate from the abyss because the abyss represents evil whereas God's Spirit is a Spirit of pure goodness. Put another way, God is pure goodness, and additional goodness only comes from God. By implication then, God is also represented by substance. Of course, it can seem odd to speak of God in terms of substance because we do not typically think of Him as a physical, tangible presence, but in Genesis chapter one, the author's intention is simply to emphatically distinguish God and His works of Creation from evil. The rest of the Creation story consistently expresses this distinction.

Why did God Create Evil?

That question often leads people astray from God. However, from the preceding explanation, we can see that God did not create evil because evil is not a created thing; it is not substance. Evil is the absence of substance; it is nothingness and emptiness. Emptiness is not created but only results from the absence of substance. As a practical example of this logic, if you create a table, that table now exists wherever you have placed it, but it also simultaneously does not exist, or is **absent**, from every other location. You created a table, not its absence, yet the table's absence exists simply as the opposite of its presence.

As the Creation story portrays God as separate from the abyss and distinct from evil, evil is to be further understood as the absence of God. God exists, which by definition means that the absence of God also has to exist. Evil is that absence of God. Some people will object that God is Omnipresent – i.e. existing everywhere – and that is true. But, the absence of God to which I refer, and which the Creation story metaphorically describes, is a spiritual absence. This is why Genesis 1:2 refers to God's **Spirit** rather than to God **generally**. The verse is emphasizing the point that while God is present at and aware of every instance of evil in the world, God's Spirit – i.e. His Perspective – is not represented in or by that evil. This principle is proven in human experience as well, for we observe that evil things happen when human beings disregard the Spirit of God in their own minds – that is, when they **make God absent** from their spirits.

Why would God allow us the power to make Him absent from our spirits? Because, He must allow us that power if we are to have free will, for free will cannot exist unless there are at least two options from which to choose. God wants us to have free will because He wants us to love Him, but love, in order for it to be authentic, has to be the product of free will.

Finally, I would like to clarify some terms related to evil. The Hebrew word which is translated as "evil" means simply "bad" or "badness," depending upon if it is used as an adjective or a noun.

Although, it can also be used for a wide variety of synonyms of “bad” or “badness” or as a reference to things that are bad in some way, such as calamity, misery, hardship, etc.^{xxxii} These synonymous definitions make sense because, as described previously, evil is detrimental to human life. The personification of evil is often termed in the Bible as “devil” or “Satan.” “Devil” is the translation, likely a transliteration, of a Greek word that means “prone to slander, slanderous, accusing falsely.”^{xxxiii} A transliteration is simply an expression of a word from its original language in the alphabet of the destination language.^{xxxiv} “Satan” is the transliteration of a Hebrew word that means “adversary.”^{xxxv} Both of these words accord in meaning because, as I describe in chapter 4 of this book, succumbing to the efforts of evil is to believe a falsehood about yourself. In that way, evil is the adversary that accuses you of that falsehood, or put another way, evil attempts to deceive you into believing that falsehood.

Genesis 1:3-25

In this passage, God begins His work of Creation, and in that work we see a consistent theme of separating good from evil. God creates light separate from the darkness of the abyss. He establishes the sky, which to the ancient Near Eastern mind is a solid barrier holding back the waters of the abyss.^{xxxvi,xxxvii} God makes dry land appear from out of the waters of the abyss and creates all the plant and animal life. After God creates each of these elements of the Earth, the Scripture records that He “*saw that it was good.*”^{xxxviii}

As described previously, goodness is substance as opposed to evil, which is the empty, dark abyss. God’s Creative work shows His will and power to overcome evil in that He is willing and able to create and sustain all of this goodness in the midst of the abyss of evil. Indeed, God is even able to take some of the water of the evil abyss, collect it into seas on earth, and make it teem with life that will provide sustenance for humanity. Thus, God even has the will and power to transform evil into goodness – i.e. to bring substance out of nothingness.

Furthermore, we are to interpret the Earth as being an oasis of goodness in an endless expanse of evil. God creates this oasis for the benefit of humanity, which is God’s upcoming, final, and best creation of goodness. The Earth is a good thing that God gives to humanity, whom He considers to be the best of His Creation. God considers humanity to be the most honorable of all His works of Creation, and He honors us by giving us the Earth.^{xxxix} As human beings reading this story, we are meant to discern not only how much God loves and honors us, that He would create this world for us, but also that we are entirely dependent upon God for our lives. Remember, the sky is depicted as holding back the evil, deathly water of the abyss. We are meant to understand that but for the power, will, and love of God, those waters – i.e. that evil – would crush and destroy us.

Some Christians may be troubled by this story for multiple reasons. We know that the sky is really the atmosphere of the earth, and beyond it is the empty vacuum of outer space. Some people believe in the theory of evolution and that every living creature exists only because it is the current victor in the “survival of the fittest.” Some people believe that the whole universe of celestial bodies is the result of natural processes beginning with the Big Bang. However, even if you believe all of those scientific theories, the metaphorical, doctrinal meaning of the Creation story is still valid. Whatever process God used, it is still ultimately the result of His power and love for us that we exist and have the Earth and life on it to sustain us. Furthermore, we are still dependent upon God for our continued existence, for even from a secular, scientific point of view, there is much that we cannot control, such as the Earth’s orbit of the sun and solar flares.

Genesis 1:26-27 – The Most Important Passage in the Bible

²⁶ God said, “*Let’s make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over the livestock, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.*” ²⁷ God created man in his own image. In God’s image he created him; male and female he created them.

In that passage, we find the fundamental truth about God and all humanity: **all humanity’s true identity is innately and permanently the perfect image and likeness of God; God is permanently the substance and foundation of all humanity’s true identity. Humanity and God share a permanent true identity.** This passage is the foundation and thesis statement of the entire Bible, which is why it is placed in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible. Furthermore, Yahweh is the One Who established and upholds this truth and its implications, so both are the substance of His Spirit – i.e. His Perspective – and thus are the motivation for all of His behavior. By extension, this truth and its implications are the foundation of Christian doctrine and faith.

Significantly, the very fact that this passage is phrased the way that it is, namely “*let’s make man in our image, after our likeness,*” is miraculous in itself because that phrasing serves the intellectual requirements of people from both Near Eastern and Greco-Roman philosophical backgrounds. Near Eastern people typically think in terms of discrete, concrete objects and movement whereas people from a Greco-Roman philosophical background typically think in terms of abstractions and static concepts.^{x1} The words “*image*” and “*likeness*” serve both philosophical perspectives because they can refer to both concrete, dynamic things and abstract, static concepts. However, those words are much more abstract and static than the vocabulary that a Near Eastern speaker or writer would typically use, so it is truly a miracle from God that this all-important passage is

written in this way. As Greco-Roman based thinkers, we Westerners would likely not be able to decipher the meaning of all the figurative language in the Bible if we did not have the benefit of this passage that fits our way of thinking.

The Near Eastern Concept of Identity

xli,xlii,xliii,xliv,xlv

What does it mean to have the true identity that is the perfect image and likeness of God? Well, first I must describe the Near Eastern concept of identity. I will begin with an exposition upon the concept of honor, for honor is integral to the understanding of the Near Eastern concept of identity.

At a basic level, honor, as a noun, is the state of being considered good, and thus favorable, in the judgment of the one(s) judging you, and dishonor, as a noun, is the state of being considered bad, and thus unfavorable, in the judgment of the one(s) judging you. In Near Eastern culture, the fundamental characteristic that makes one good, and thus favorable, is strength, in various forms, and the fundamental characteristic that makes one bad, and thus unfavorable, is weakness, in various forms. Accordingly, we can say that strength is the fundamental characteristic that makes one honorable, and weakness is the fundamental characteristic that makes one dishonorable. By extension, honor, as a noun, is the state of being considered strong in the judgment of the one(s) judging you, and dishonor, as a noun, is the state of being considered weak in the judgment of the one(s) judging you. The party who is judged can be one or more persons, Yahweh, other gods (to the extent that you believe that they exist), or virtually anything else, and the party making the judgment can be oneself, one or more other persons, Yahweh, or other gods. By implication, honor and dishonor, as nouns, can also refer to the actions, words, characteristics, or circumstances that cause those judgments – i.e. these are the strengths or weaknesses of the party being judged.

Since the concepts of strength and weakness can be referenced in a myriad of contexts, when specifically referring to matters of honor and dishonor, I typically use the phrases “judged to be honorable” and “judged to be dishonorable” rather than “judged to be strong” and “judged to be weak,” but the respective phrases are equivalent in meaning. Furthermore, when discussing honor and dishonor, it is important to establish not only the object of the judgment – i.e. the person being judged – but also the subject of the judgment – i.e. the person who makes the judgment. Therefore, where I write about honor and dishonor, I often use phrasing that clearly establishes those parties. For example, I might write that “a man seeks honor in the judgment of people and in the judgment of God.”

As verbs, to “honor” or “dishonor” a man is to do or say something that conveys the impression^{xlvi} that you judge him to be strong or weak, respectively. Honoring somebody takes the form of saying or doing something that acknowledges, maintains, and/or increases his strength because you desire to create, maintain, or strengthen a positive relationship with him. You cultivate this relationship because you judge the person to be strong, and you want to motivate him to reciprocally honor you. After all, you want to be honored by those whom you judge to be strong. Therefore, these words and actions by which you acknowledge, maintain, and/or increase a man’s strength also convey the impression that you already judge him to be strong and thus favor him. Dishonoring somebody takes the form of saying or doing something that acknowledges, maintains, and/or increases his weakness because you seek no relationship with him. You eschew the opportunity for a relationship with him because you judge him to be weak, and the result of you dishonoring him is that he is motivated to dishonor you in reciprocation. Therefore, these words and actions by which you acknowledge, maintain, and/or increase a man’s weakness also convey the impression that you already judge him to be weak and thus disfavor him.

Such words and actions of honor and dishonor often also have the effect of causing other people in the community to judge the man to be strong or weak, respectively, so those actions convey the impression of those judgments as well. Namely, if the members of a community judge you to be strong and if they see you treat another man as being strong or weak, then they will likely judge that man to be strong or weak, respectively, and treat him accordingly. In other words, the judgments made by men who are publicly-considered to be honorable influence the judgments made by other people.

The adjectives “honorable” and “dishonorable” mean: of the nature of being judged to be strong or weak, respectively. The adverbs “honorably” and “dishonorably” refer to actions that convey the impression of a judgment of strength or weakness, respectively.

For Near Easterners, honor is the prerequisite of a person’s meaningful existence, for honor is the element that makes a man’s existence meaningful. Indeed, honor is the highest good, and a good and meaningful life requires honor and indicates the presence of honor in the person whose life is meaningful. Furthermore, a man desires that his honor be perfect and continue forever, and he zealously defends it for that reason. Former honor that has been lost and the anticipated gain of honor beyond the immediate future are of no value because a man lives in the present. Additionally, any imperfect or deficient aspects of a man’s strength can destroy the totality of that man’s honor in the judgment of people. Thus, only perfect honor is guaranteed to be permanent.^{xlvii}

Additionally, it is important to understand that in Near Eastern culture, honor and dishonor are not necessarily strictly binary conditions. A man’s honor, or lack thereof, in the judgment of his

community falls upon a spectrum that is very nuanced, particularly because the judgment can vary based upon the person making it. In other words, most people in that culture are neither perfectly honorable nor totally dishonorable in the judgment of the community, but, rather, the community members will judge a given man as being stronger than some and weaker than others.^{xlviii} Unless I specify otherwise, my use of the terms referring to honor should not be interpreted to apply in the extreme. That is, where I write of honor and dishonor, those terms should only be understood as applying in the extreme if I specifically qualify them as “perfect,” “total,” or something similar. Also, note that the concept of honor can also be distinguished from the concepts of dignity, self-esteem, prestige, etc.^{xlix} In writing this book, for the sake of brevity, I use the terms “honor” and “dishonor” as a shorthand for a man’s social status in relation to others and for all the elements that contribute to the creation of that social status.¹

Turning now to the Near Eastern concept of identity, the wording of Genesis 1:26-27 would have had a very visceral impact upon the contemporary Near Eastern audience hearing or reading that passage. For Near Easterners, their sense of identity is largely collective and externally-determined. It is collective in the sense that an ancient Near Easterner considers himself to be part of nested collectives including his immediate family, extended family, clan, tribe, village, nation, religion, etc.^{li} It is a similar situation for relatively modern, particularly rural, Near Easterners. With the possible exceptions of religion and nation, within each collective, the members also consider themselves to be actual or theoretical kin through some ancestor, recent or far past.

Each collective is composed of members who have the same concept of the characteristics that are befitting of a member of that collective, and that concept is what I call the identity of the collective or the “collective identity.” These characteristics are typically those of strength and implicitly honor in the judgment of people and in the judgment of God. The collective identity is typically considered by the collective members to be best understood, believed, and embodied by some real or imagined member(s) of the collective, who is considered to be the ideal model of that collective and that collective identity. For instance, in the case of an immediate family, the father or grandfather is likely considered by the family members – i.e. the members of that collective – to be the ideal model of what it means to be part of that family – i.e. that collective.

Each member of a collective considers the characteristics of the ideal model of that collective to be the identity that is true, real, and genuine of himself as well. He believes that the “collective identity” is his true identity. Therefore, each member of the collective believes that he shares the same true identity with every other member of the collective, including the ideal model of that collective. The collective member strives to behave in accordance with the characteristics of that collective identity. When he fails in that effort, he should still believe the collective identity to be his true identity, disavow his deviant behavior as being unbefitting of his true identity, and commit to returning himself to behavior that does befit his true identity.

This is why I use the term “true identity,” for it is in contrast to “empirical identity.” A man’s empirical identity is his spirit, his behavior that is motivated by that spirit, and his circumstances in life whereas his true identity is the combination of characteristics comprising his collective identity. A man’s empirical identity should express and reflect his true identity, but that does not always occur. Sometimes a man is deceived about his true identity and behaves in accordance with that deceived spirit. Also, sometimes his living circumstances are beyond his control. Contrariwise, God, being Omniscient, cannot be deceived, and being Omnipotent, His living circumstances are always in His control. Therefore, God’s empirical identity always accords with His true identity.

As a member of a collective, a man expects to be supported, to varying degrees, by the other members of that collective. The closer, more immediate the kinship between the members, the more support that the members expect from each other. Furthermore, a man should be willing to support the other members of his collective because doing so maintains and increases the strength of the collective, which will maintain and increase the honor of the collective in the judgment of people. In other words, it is in his own self-interest to support the members of his collective.

The Near Easterner’s attraction to membership in collectives is the promise of protection – i.e. strength – in physical, material, and spiritual forms. The physical help takes the form of assistance in fights or battles. The material help takes the form of gifts and loans in one’s time of need or the use of a member’s socioeconomic influence to help another member obtain a job, legal/governmental assistance, etc. The spiritual protection exists as well because for a Near Easterner, his collective is the primary source of his honor, both in the judgment of those collective members and in the judgment of the wider community. The collective member has a group of people – i.e. the other members of the collective – who affirm that his true identity is in accordance with their commonly-acknowledged ideal characteristics of strength that compose the collective’s identity. Thus, the honor of the collective, in the judgment of its members, belongs to every member of the collective. Put another way, every member of a collective judges every other member to be equally honorable in true identity as he judges himself to be. Furthermore, to the extent that the wider community judges a collective to be honorable, that judgment also applies to each member of that collective. Additionally, when a man’s honor is challenged, justifiably or not, his fellow collective members will stand with him in defense of that honor, for the honor or dishonor of any one member of a collective is imputed to every other member as well. For the same reason, members of a collective seek to strengthen, honor, and bring honor to each other in various ways. Given that the Near Eastern concept of meaningful existence and significance has the prerequisite of honor, this spiritual protection is not considered to be a luxury but a vital necessity of life.

The other relevant aspect of the Near Eastern concept of identity is that it is externally-determined. A man's judgments of himself, other people, places, ideas, beliefs, etc. are all typically based upon and in accordance with other people's judgments of those topics. For a Near Easterner, he believes, or wants to believe, that his true identity is the identity of his collective or the collective to which he desires to belong, but his certainty about the accuracy of that belief typically depends upon the other members of the collective treating him as if that is his true identity. In other words, if they interact with him – in word and deed – in a way that honors him, then in so doing, they indicate that they believe him to be a legitimate member of that collective. With that external validation from his fellow collective members, the man feels emboldened and assured in his belief that his true identity is actually the identity of that collective because the other collective members have demonstrated that they believe the same about him.

When the man behaves contrary to the identity of that collective, if the other collective members still consider him to have their collective identity as his true identity, then they will privately express disapproval of his behavior but not dishonor him. As a result, the man will remain confident that he is a member of the collective and that its identity is his true identity. On the other hand, if the members of a collective treat a wayward member only with dishonor, then they express their belief that he is no longer part of their collective and that their collective identity is no longer his true identity. As a result, the man will believe, or at least be extremely tempted to believe, that he is no longer a member of that collective and that its identity is no longer his true identity. Such an outcome is devastating for a man because to lose or disbelieve his membership in his collective is to lose his physical and material strength and his honor. It is to effectively lose his significance, relevance, and value as a person. It is to lose his life in a figurative but nonetheless visceral sense.

Humanity: God's Collective

In Genesis 1:26-27, we learn that from the moment of our creation by God, we are all permanently part of God's collective in which God Himself is the ideal model. By God's own design, the collective identity of God is the permanent true identity of all humanity. In our true identity, we all share in common with God that collective identity of God. Put in the terms of Genesis 1:26-27, the innate and permanent true identity of all humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God. God's statement, "*Let's make man in our image, after our likeness,*" is meant to be an allusion to the Near Eastern concept of collective identity. Again, this is all by God's own design, so we are all externally-determined to be and validated as being permanent members of God's collective by the ideal model of that collective – that is, God Himself.

Our membership in the collective of God is first and primary over all other collectives to which we belong – i.e. family, clan, tribe, etc. Any secondary collectives of which we are part should be part

of the master collective of God. That is, any secondary collective identities that you believe apply to you must not contradict the collective identity of God, which is your primary collective identity. Without our collective identity in God and our membership in God's collective, we would be nothing more than the dust from which He formed us.^{lvi}

You may notice that I do not describe humanity as just the "image and likeness of God" in our true identity but, rather, "**permanently the perfect** image and likeness of God" in our true identity or some phrasing to that effect. We know that we are the **full, total, and perfect** image and likeness of God in our true identity because God does not list any exceptions or qualifications to our similarity to Him in Genesis 1:26-27. In fact, God goes so far as to declare that humanity has dominion over all other living creatures that He has made. In Genesis 1:28, God commands humanity to "*fill the earth [...] and subdue it.*" How could anything less than the **perfect** image and likeness of God be qualified and worthy, in the perspective of Omniscient God, to have such dominion over all this goodness that God created?

By the same logic, how could anything less than the **permanent** perfect image and likeness of God be so qualified and worthy? God, Who knows all things, would not have given us this authority over His Earth – i.e. over His estate – if He knew of any current or future differences between our true identity and Himself. Indeed, the phrasing of Genesis 1:26-28 has the connotation of a Near Eastern father entrusting the day-to-day administration of his farmland to his adult son,^{liii} and a Near Eastern father and son definitely are part of the same collective and share the same collective identity as their true identity. The Near Eastern father plans and expects that his son will forever be part of his collective. Being Omniscient, God is certain that humanity is forever part of His collective.

What is the Nature of God?

We know that our true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, but in order for that identity to be meaningful to us, we must know the nature of God. God is goodness, as opposed to evil; substance, as opposed to nothingness; strength, as opposed to weakness; knowledge, as opposed to ignorance; wisdom, as opposed to foolishness; permanence, as opposed to transience. Strength is the primary characteristic of God, which encompasses all the rest of the characteristics in that list. God is perfectly strong, in every aspect of strength, so He has perfect honor in His own judgment and should have perfect honor in the judgment of all people.

Admittedly, the Bible focuses much more upon the fact that humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity rather than upon what the abstract, static nature of God is.

However, this circumstance exists only because we best discern God's nature from His relationship with us. Namely, we reckon God to be perfectly good because He always provides for our needs and protects us. We reckon God to be of the nature of substance because He has power over evil, which is nothingness, and He created the things of substance within the abyss of evil. We reckon God to be permanent because He has manifested His presence among humanity since the beginning of our existence. We reckon God to be perfectly knowledgeable and perfectly wise because we see the success of His will in the Bible and in our own lives. Furthermore, God is omnipotent, as demonstrated by His work in the Creation story and by His miracles. Also, His omnipotence implies His omniscience and omnipresence because the lack of either would be a weakness and thus contradict His omnipotence. For all those reasons, we reckon God to be perfectly strong, and as a result, we judge God to be perfectly honorable.

Some will ask, though, since human beings do not have ubiquity, permanence, power, knowledge, and wisdom equal to that of God, how can it be that we share the collective identity of God in our true identity? We have strength equal to that of God precisely because we have access to and benefit from the omnipresence, omniscience, omnipotence, and every other supreme excellence of God. Namely, God favors humanity as His perfect image and likeness in our true identity, so He uses all of His abilities for our well being. We have the strength of God precisely because God chooses to use His full strength for our benefit. This is the benefit of being in a collective: its full resources can be used to help you, so in that way, its full resources belong to you as much as they do to every other member of the collective.

To return to the original question – what does it mean to be the perfect image and likeness of God in our permanent true identity? – the answer is that in our true identity, humanity permanently perfectly shares God's characteristics: goodness, substance, power, knowledge, wisdom, presence, and permanence. In our true identity, we share God's strength, and accordingly, we share His honor. In our true identity, we are permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God because He knows that we share His perfect strength in our true identity. For the same reason, we should also judge ourselves and each other to be permanently perfectly honorable in our true identity.

Why does our True Identity Matter?

If you believe that humanity's true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, then you must also believe in the implications of that permanent true identity. What are those implications? From a broad perspective, I refer back to the previous discussion of the benefits of membership in a collective: protection on physical, material, and spiritual levels.^{liv} Namely, being part of God's collective means that we are protected by God: physically by the greatest power and

courage, materially by the greatest wealth and generosity, and spiritually by the greatest honor. We can also examine the implications of our true identity in God from a more detailed perspective:

1. As I wrote in the section titled “What is the Nature of God?,” we share the characteristics of God in our true identity. Furthermore, as the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity, we are meant to have the Spirit – i.e. the Perspective – of God as our own spirit. Accordingly, we are to use both the characteristics of our true identity and the help that God gives to us to manifest His Holy Spirit in sensory existence. That is, we should behave in ways that befit and express the Holy Spirit.
2. Our true identity is the reason why God loves us, for it is only natural to love those whom you consider to be like you. That which God loves about us is our true identity because in our true identity, we are His perfect image and likeness. Furthermore, we are to love God and other people because we all share the same collective identity.
3. Since God knows Himself to be permanently perfectly strong and us to be His perfect image and likeness in our permanent true identity, He also judges us to be permanently perfectly strong in our true identity. That is to say, our true identity is permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God. As I will explain in greater detail in Chapter 4 of this book, that judgment from God means that we are permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity.
4. Our true identity is why we have God’s grace. Grace simply means “favor” in the sense of being favored, preferred, liked, and shown kindness because you are favored.^{lv,lvi} God favors us because we are His perfect image and likeness in our true identity, for it is only natural to favor those whom you consider to be like you. God shows us His grace in an infinite number of ways, such as protection, provision, forgiveness of sins, etc. Of course, the greatest grace that God has shown to all people is that He made us all His perfect image and likeness in our permanent true identity. He envisioned what humanity could be with that true identity, had favor for us in that prospect, and then created us with that true identity.
5. Sin expresses the sinner’s belief that his true identity is sinful. Sinfulness is unlikeness to God and dishonor in the judgment of God. Since our true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and thus permanently perfectly honorable in God’s judgment, sinfulness cannot be part of our true identity. There is no sinfulness in God, so there can be no sinfulness in His permanent perfect image and likeness. Therefore, sin does not accurately express our true identity nor change it. This is why, from the very beginning of Creation, God forgave all the sins that all human beings would ever commit. I will discuss these concepts in greater detail in chapters 4 and 6 of this book.
6. Since God is perfectly good, we are also perfectly good in our true identity as His perfect image and likeness. When we behave in accordance with that which God declares to be good behavior, we are not transforming ourselves into good people but, rather, only

expressing the goodness that we already possess in our permanent true identity. When we behave contrary to that which God declares to be good behavior, we are not transforming ourselves into bad people but, rather, only expressing our state of deception about our true identity.

7. As I will explain in chapter 12 of this book, eternal life with God is the peace of mind that comes from believing that you are permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God. As mentioned in point number 3 above, our permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God is permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God. Therefore, we have eternal life with God when we simply believe in our permanent true identity in God and the permanent perfect honor of it in the judgment of God. The only effective way to believe in that true identity and honor is to have Christian faith. Hence, having Christian faith is the only effective way to have eternal life with God.
8. Our true identity in God is the reason why we should obey God's commands. God loves us because we are His perfect image and likeness in our true identity, and we are part of His collective for the same reason. Therefore, we can conclude that God's commands to us must be for our benefit. No Near Eastern man would lead his collective members astray, so God surely would not either.
9. There are no other gods besides Yahweh, but even if you believe that other gods do exist, our true identity in Yahweh is the reason why we should have faith in and worship **only** Yahweh. Our true identity is the perfect image and likeness of only Yahweh, so we are part of the collective of Yahweh, not of other gods. Therefore, Yahweh is the only God that we should identify with, love, honor, trust, obey, seek help from, and worship.
10. The Messiah of God is Jesus Christ, Who, among human beings, best represents and manifests the Spirit of God. It is for that reason that we should have faith in Jesus Christ.

The Original Covenant

Our permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God is the original covenant between Yahweh and humanity. I also call it the “covenant truth.” The word “covenant” simply means a formal relationship.^{lvii} Indeed, any Near Eastern collective is a covenant, for its members are all related in the sense of believing the identity of that collective to be their common true identity. In the case of the original covenant between God and humanity, it refers to a formal relationship between God and all humanity. The substance of that relationship, and thus of the original covenant, is contained in Genesis 1:26-27. The formal relationship – i.e. the original covenant – between God and humanity is that all humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God in our permanent true identity. As described previously,^{lviii} that true identity that we have in God has multiple wonderful implications, so while the original covenant can be stated in those brief terms, its significance is broad. Furthermore, as Yahweh is the One Who established and

upholds the covenant truth and its implications, both are also the substance of His Spirit – i.e. His Perspective.

In Christian doctrine, we often speak of the “Old Covenant” and the “New Covenant.” The former term refers to the Law of God, as contained in the Old Testament of the Bible, and the latter term refers to Jesus Christ. Significantly though, the Old Testament mentions multiple covenants between God and human beings. However, it is important to understand that every “covenant” between God and any human being that is mentioned in the Bible after Genesis 1:26-27 is actually only meant to be a unique expression or form of the same original covenant that is found in Genesis 1:26-27. Thus, all covenants mentioned in the Bible apply equally to all humanity since Genesis 1:26-27 applies to all humanity. For the moment, I ask that you accept those statements a priori, but I will explain later, in Chapters 5 and 7, how both the Law of God and Jesus Christ express the original covenant of Genesis 1:26-27.

The reason that the Bible refers to each of these covenants individually is simply because the ancient Israelites did not naturally think in terms of separating form and substance. Contrariwise, in modern Western philosophy, we often think in terms of separating the two. To our perspective, when confronted with a collection of objects, we naturally think in terms of how those objects may share form or shape but be made of different substances or how those objects can be made of the same substance but be shaped into different forms. To the ancient Israelite mind, what we call an object’s form is only an appearance that **expresses** the object’s content or substance. In other words, to their minds, the separation of a covenant’s form from its substance would make the form meaningless and empty,^{lx} so they do not think or speak in terms of such separation.

When we read in the Bible about the Law of God, Jesus Christ, or any other individual covenant made between God and some human being or group of human beings after Genesis 1:26-27, we are meant to understand that covenant to be a form – i.e. an **expression** – of the original covenant in Genesis 1:26-27. That original covenant is the only covenant that exists; every other “covenant” between God and one or more human beings is only intended to be an expression of that original covenant. Put another way, the common substance of all the covenant expressions is the fact that all humanity’s permanent true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God – i.e. the original covenant.

Some examples of such covenant expressions are the promises that God makes to the Patriarchs – i.e. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – that He will give them a large progeny and land to support it.^{lx} It is an honor for a Near Eastern man to have a large and thriving progeny because his descendants will support him in his old age and remember him with honor after he is dead. Therefore, the promises that God makes to the Patriarchs are an honor to them, but more importantly, they imply

the substance of the original covenant. Namely, no Near Eastern man would prosper men who are not part of his collective, for the result of doing so would be a weakening of himself by strengthening his enemy. Accordingly, God increasing the size and wealth of the Patriarchs' collective is meant to be understood as God increasing His own collective. Thus, these promises – that is, these covenant expressions – are expressions of the original covenant of Genesis 1:26-27 that all humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity and thus is part of God's collective.

Understanding the link connecting all the covenant expressions in the Bible is important not just for logical consistency but also to dispel any notion that God has greater favor for some human beings than He does for others. For instance, when we think of God's "people" in the Old Testament, we typically think of the Exodus-era Israelites and their descendants, but the Israelites are descendants of the same progenitors as those of all humanity: Adam and Eve. In Genesis 1:26-27, God creates man and woman in His perfect image and likeness, so Adam and Eve are the first "people of God," which means that all of their descendants – i.e. all humanity as members of the collective of Adam and Eve – are also the "people of God." All humanity has the same design as Adam and Eve: the perfect image and likeness of God in our permanent true identity.

Why is this Fundamental Truth so Infrequently Mentioned?

Aside from Genesis 1:26-27, there are few passages in the Bible that state the true identity of humanity in a direct and explicit way. There are many passages that heavily allude to it, and of course, the entire Bible ultimately expresses that covenant truth and its implications. Nevertheless, contrary to what we might expect, there are few other explicit statements of it. And so, we rightly ask, "why not?"

As I will detail in chapter 4 of this book, the fundamental lie of which evil seeks to convince all humanity is that our true identity is not the permanent perfect image and likeness of God and that we are thus not permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity. Sadly, evil often succeeds in working this deception. Indeed, many people instinctively label it blasphemy against God to say that humanity is like God, let alone the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity. To be clear, the Greek word for "blasphemy" means simply "slander, detraction, speech injurious to another's good name," and typically the word is used to refer to such speech that is in some way related to God.^{lxii} Those who do not believe the covenant truth consider it to be slander against God to equate humanity with God in any way, but that conclusion is incorrect, as the Bible and this book demonstrate.

This same resistance to the covenant truth existed in Jesus' time as well. For example, in John 10:34-36, Jesus comes as close as He is ever recorded to directly stating the true identity of humanity.

"Jesus answered them, "Isn't it written in your law, 'I said, you are gods?' If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture can't be broken), do you say of him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You blaspheme,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God?'"

In that passage, Jesus quotes Psalm 82:6, in which the author says to the Israelites, "*I said, 'You are gods, all of you are sons of the Most High.'*" Aside from Genesis 1:26-27, those two passages are the clearest, most direct expressions in the Bible of the true identity of humanity as the perfect image and likeness of God. Yet, in John chapter 10, when Jesus makes that same statement, the people He is speaking to try to seize Him for arrest.^{lxii,lxiii} That is how deep the deception from evil lies in the minds of many people, so is it any wonder that the Biblical figures, who do know humanity's true identity in God, often refrain from stating it directly and explicitly? Is it any wonder that Jesus instead typically uses parables and other figurative language to express this true identity of humanity? Obviously, if directly and explicitly stating the covenant truth will result in arrest, or worse, then it is prudent to state it in more indirect and subtle ways, lest you be prevented from communicating it to people at all.

Furthermore, it is important to understand that anytime a Biblical character chooses to have faith in God, it is not blind faith. Even if the character does not speak in terms of true identity, his faith in God is ultimately based upon his recognition of his true identity in God. Namely, he chooses to have faith in God because he recalls God's faithfulness to him and his ancestors. He recalls that God has never forsaken them and helps them despite their transgressions. Realizing that consistent behavior from God, the man concludes that He must be part of the collective of God and thus that he must share a collective identity with God in his true identity. In other words, the man who has faith in God has to believe, implicitly or explicitly, that his true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God.

Faith

Faith in God is:

- A spirit of belief in the covenant truth of Genesis 1:26-27 and its implications.
- A spirit of trust that God has established and consistently upholds that covenant truth and its implications.

- In the case of **Christian** faith in God, we must add an additional element: a spirit of belief in Jesus Christ that as the Messiah of God, He manifests in His words, deeds, life, death, resurrection, and ascension the Spirit of God, the substance of which is the covenant truth and its implications.

Indeed, faith in the covenant truth and its implications is faith in God because the covenant truth is meaningless and has no implications unless God upholds it and treats us in accordance with it. The covenant truth is the basis upon which we both love and trust God. The distinction between the two concepts – i.e. love and trust – is important because you can love a person while not trusting him.

Love is affection founded upon the recognition that the object of your love is like you. A man would not love a person whom he believes is different from himself because to do so is to consider himself to be defective. Namely, if you have affection, favor, and fondness^{lxiv} for someone whom you consider to be different from yourself, then you must also believe that you lack one or more characteristics that make a person favorable. Similarly, honor implies the recognition that the person you judge to be honorable is like you. A man would not judge another man to be honorable if he also believed that man to be unlike himself because to do so is to consider his own strength, and thus implicitly his own honor, to be defective. Namely, if you judge another man to be both strong and unlike you, then you must also believe that you lack one or more characteristics that make a man strong and thus cause others to judge him to be strong. Rather, you honor a man because you judge him to have the same strength that you have, and you love that man because he is thus like you. Indeed, to honor a man is to love him, and to love a man is to honor him.

Of course, some people will point out the adage “opposites attract,” meaning that people love and honor those who have characteristics they admire but lack in themselves. However, in that scenario, what you love and honor about the other person are characteristics that you believe are right and good for you but that you do not currently manifest in your behavior. In other words, you believe that in your ideal self^{lxv} – that is, your true identity – you do have those characteristics. Put another way, you love and honor the other person because you believe that you and he share a collective identity as your true identity.

It is worth noting that in the Bible, the words which are translated as “love” and “hate” have broad ranges of meaning. To the Western reader, the English words “love” and “hate” describe emotional extremes of affection and aversion, respectively. In the Bible, however, often a single word is used to express all degrees of affection, and a single word is also often used to express all degrees of aversion. Thus, “love” can mean like, prefer, be fond of, find to be pleasant, or love as an emotional extreme. Similarly, “hate” can mean dislike, be unconcerned with, find to be unpleasant,

or hate as an emotional extreme. The context in which the words are used determines the proper interpretation.^{lxvi,lxvii}

From the perspective of the Holy Spirit, your love for another person or for God should be based solely upon your recognition of that person's or God's true identity being the same as your true identity. In other words, this is the recognition that all people and God are members of God's collective and thus share His collective identity as their true identity. That is also the sole basis upon which we should, according to the Holy Spirit, judge another person or God to be honorable. Furthermore, loving and honoring God while simultaneously hating and dishonoring another person is only a superficial and unsustainable arrangement. Eventually you will have to face the reality that if you hate and dishonor another person, then you must deny the covenant truth since it applies to all humanity. If you deny the covenant truth, then you have no reason to love and honor God or to believe that God loves and honors you. You then have two options. You can continue to hate and dishonor the other person and thus deny the covenant truth, but that means you will have to hate and dishonor God, believe that He hates and dishonors you, and judge yourself to be dishonorable. Alternatively, you can believe the covenant truth, continue to love and honor God, continue to believe that He loves and honors you, continue to judge yourself to be honorable, and begin to love and honor that other person whom you previously hated and dishonored.

In contrast to love, your trust in another person should be based upon that person's record of behaving in such a way that he demonstrates sincere belief in a shared true identity with you, which is to say that he consistently demonstrates love for you. You can love a person without trusting him, but you cannot trust a person without believing that he loves you. Furthermore, you cannot trust a person without knowing why he loves you. No amount of favorable treatment from somebody can cause you to trust him unless you know that his motive for treating you favorably is reliable. That reliable motive is that he loves you consistently because you and he share a permanent true identity, and he believes in that shared true identity. Then again, the more that he treats you favorably, the easier it is for you to believe that you and he share a true identity and thus that his love for you and the favorable treatment toward you that it generates are reliable. All of this is to say that there is a symbiotic relationship between trust and love.

God loves us because we are His perfect image and likeness in our permanent true identity. Significantly, while God always loves us because of our permanent true identity in Him,^{lxviii} He does not always trust us, for we do not always express love for Him by obeying His commands.

We love God because He is the substance of our permanent true identity. However, we trust God because He has proven Himself to be trustworthy, without fail, throughout humanity's entire history with Him. God consistently treats us with love, and we know the reason why God behaves

that way. Namely, we know that God consistently loves us and shows love for us because He knows that our true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness. Indeed, when we say that we trust – i.e. have faith in – God, the thing that we trust about Him is that He will forever treat us in accordance with our permanent true identity as His perfect image and likeness because He forever believes that to be our true identity. Put another way, we trust that God will always uphold the covenant truth and its implications.

The Name of God

First mentioned in Genesis 2:4, the proper name of God is “Yahweh.” That name is not a translation but, rather, a transliteration from the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament. A transliteration is simply an expression of a word from its original language in the alphabet of the destination language.^{lxix} Admittedly though, while I believe this transliteration to be accurate, it is not universally agreed upon by scholars, as some would render it as “Yehovah” or “Jehovah.”^{lxx}

The concept of a name in ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek does not just refer to somebody’s appellation but also to his entire identity – i.e. his characteristics, reputation, perspective, behavioral predispositions, words, deeds, etc.^{lxxi,lxxii,lxxiii} Furthermore, in ancient Hebrew, names have direct translational meaning.^{lxxiv} For instance, the name “Moses” comes from a Hebrew word meaning “drawing out (of the water),”^{lxxv} which refers to the story, in Exodus 2:1-10, about Moses being rescued from a basket in the water by Pharaoh’s daughter.

The name “Yahweh” has meaning as well, but that meaning is disputed by scholars. One of the popular translations, and the one which I believe to be correct, is that “Yahweh” is the causative conjugation of the Hebrew verb meaning “to be” or “to become” but used as a noun.^{lxxvi,lxxvii,lxxviii} In the ancient Hebrew language, a verb can be conjugated in such a way that it expresses a causation of the action that it fundamentally describes. For example, the Hebrew verb meaning “to swallow greedily,” when in the causative conjugation, would be translated as “to feed,”^{lxxix} in the sense of “causing to eat.” Accordingly, if “Yahweh” is the causative conjugation of the verb meaning “to be” or “to become,” then the translation of “Yahweh” would be “to cause to be or become” or “to make.” Used as a noun, the translation would be “the cause of one’s being or creation” or, more simply, “maker” or “creator.”

“Yahweh” is a perfect name for God because God is the Maker of all good things. God is also the cause of our true identity not only because He gave it to us but also in the sense that He is the substance, source, and origin of our true identity. After all, our true identity is the perfect image

and likeness of God. Thus, the name “Yahweh” is a reference to the covenant truth that Yahweh and humanity share a collective identity.

As it states in Genesis 2:7, “*Yahweh God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.*” The phrase “*living soul*” has a double meaning here. First, it refers to the man gaining biological life. It is important to understand that the Hebrew word which is translated here as “*soul*” can also just refer to a person or being.^{lxxx} Thus, the verse indicates that God formed man from a pile of dust and made that dust into a living person.

Second, this verse is also essentially another way of stating, albeit in a figurative way, the content of Genesis 1:26-27. Namely, the breath of life symbolizes the identity of God, and by breathing the breath of life into Adam’s nostrils, God gives His identity – i.e. His collective identity – to Adam and thus makes Adam part of His collective. Put another way, God makes Adam His perfect image and likeness in Adam’s true identity.

Adam’s soul, and the soul of all human beings, **is** our permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God. It is “*a living soul*” because it is a true identity that has honor, even the highest honor. Namely, since the perfect image and likeness of God has the same strength as God, God judges our soul to be perfectly honorable, just as He judges Himself to be. Recall from the section titled “The Near Eastern Concept of Identity,” for Near Easterners, honor is the prerequisite of a person’s meaningful existence, for honor is the element that makes a man’s existence meaningful. Therefore, in that way, life, defined as meaningful existence, is a symbol of honor, and since a man’s primary source of honor is his collective,^{lxxxi} life is also a symbol of a man’s membership in a collective and his attendant possession of a true identity that is the identity of that collective.

We see, then, that “Yahweh” is a fitting name for God because He has caused humanity to be/become living beings and His perfect image and likeness in our permanent true identity.

Lastly, a common precept in Judaism is that the proper name of God, “Yahweh,” should not be spoken lest it be even unintentionally used in an irreverent manner. However, if you understand the meaning of God’s name, as I just described, then you should use it frequently, particularly in prayer, because it is then a regular reminder to you of the fundamental relationship between God and humanity. God chose this name for Himself specifically so that we would use it often and, in doing so, remember that our true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness.

Elohim

Not only does God's proper name, "Yahweh," have doctrinal significance but also the Hebrew word for "God" does as well. In the Old Testament, when the word "God" is used to refer to Yahweh, it is most often translated from the Hebrew word which has the English transliteration of "Elohim."^{lxxxii} The interesting aspect of that word is that even though we translate it as the singular noun "God," the original Hebrew word is a plural noun, so the more literal translation would be "Gods." This is why, in Genesis 1:26, the translation is "*God said, 'Let's make man in our image, after our likeness'*"^{lxxxiii} The plural pronoun "us" in the contraction "let's" and the plural adjective "our" are used rather than their singular forms because the word "God" is from the Hebrew plural noun "Elohim." Although, since the Biblical references to God are meant to be singular of One God, Yahweh, often in Scripture there is no number agreement between the noun Elohim and the words associated with it. For example, Genesis 1:27 records that "*God created man in his own image. In God's image he created him; male and female he created them,*" and all the verbs in that verse use the singular number in their conjugation even though the Hebrew word for "God" is the plural noun "Elohim."

This situation creates a quandary for us because we know that there is only one God, Yahweh, and Yahweh is, Himself, only one God. Significantly, the name "Yahweh" is a singular noun in the original Hebrew.^{lxxxiv} Nevertheless, the Scripture refers to Yahweh with the plural noun "Elohim." The resolution to the confusion is that God's very nature is plural, not in the sense of Yahweh being more than one God but, rather, in the sense of Yahweh being part of a collective.^{lxxxv} Indeed, it is the collective of Yahweh in which He is the ideal model and all human beings are His perfect image and likeness in our permanent true identity. In the Near East, a man defines himself virtually entirely by the collectives to which he belongs, so it is perfectly understandable to the Near Eastern mind that God naturally alludes to His collective when referring to Himself and that He is spoken of and written about with the same allusion.

Also, God has a nature of love.^{lxxxvi} Love requires at least two parties – the lover and the loved, hopefully with mutual awareness and reciprocation. It makes perfect sense that God refers to Himself in the plural since His very nature requires a relationship between parties. In fact, this is why God created humanity: to love us and to be loved by us. That is why God created us as His perfect image and likeness, for it is only natural to love those who are like you and to desire that they love you. After all, you value your true identity, so you also have favor and affection for those who share that true identity and desire that they favor and value you in return. You know your true identity to be strong, so you judge those who have it to be strong – i.e. you judge them to be honorable – and desire that they judge you to be the same. You perceive that true identity to be in others and validate them as possessing it, and you desire that they perceive it in you and validate you as possessing it as well.

Furthermore, since humanity is part of Yahweh's collective as His perfect image and likeness in our true identity, our nature is one of plurality, love, and relationship as well. By our own experience, we know that we desire to love others and to be loved by others, especially God. Even Scripture directly alludes to this plural nature that both we and Yahweh possess. In preparing to create woman, God says "*it is not good for the man to be alone.*"^{lxxxvii} If it is not good for man, whose true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, to be alone, then by definition, it cannot be good for God to be alone either. Hence, God created humanity. If God's very nature is one of plurality and relationship, even love, and if God created humanity as a result of that nature, then our existence and our love for God is the fulfillment, satisfaction, and gratification of the essential desire of God: a people to love and by whom to be loved.

A common cliché is to ask, "what is the meaning of life?" "what is the purpose of life?" or "why am I here?" God created each one of us for the sole purpose of loving us and being loved by us for all eternity. The entire purpose and meaning of human life is to love God and to be loved by God. Keep in mind also that to love God is also to know that He loves you because the reason that you love God is the same reason why you can also be certain that God loves you. Namely, by God's perpetual will, your true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness, and it is only natural for those who believe that they are like each other to love each other.

Yes, God commands us to love other people as well,^{lxxxviii} but that command is an expression of and means of fulfilling the greater purpose that all people should love God and know that they are loved by God. To love God because of your belief in the covenant truth is to love all people as well because the covenant truth applies to God and all people – that is, God and all people have the same collective identity. By the same logic, to love another person for his true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God is to love God. After all, you cannot love a person for having that true identity without simultaneously loving God because He is the substance of that true identity. Furthermore, when you are loved by somebody else because he believes that you and he have the same true identity that is the perfect image and likeness of God, your possession of that true identity is validated. As a result, your belief in your possession of that true identity, and thus in God's love for you, is maintained and strengthened.

The Work of Humanity

As part of the Creation story, God assigns work to Adam. That work is detailed in Genesis 2:15-17:

Yahweh God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate and keep it. Yahweh God commanded the man, saying, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but you shall not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; for in the day that you eat of it, you will surely die.”

Before discussing the work of humanity, we must first understand the tree that is mentioned in that passage. The tree symbolizes “*the knowledge of good and evil.*” However, Adam already knows goodness because he lives in the world of goodness, created by God, Who is pure goodness. Furthermore, Adam has a true identity of pure goodness, as the perfect image and likeness of God, and he believes that he possesses that true identity and thus that he benefits from its implications.^{lxxxix} Thus, the tree really symbolizes the knowledge of **both** good and evil.

All things being equal, a man with a true identity that is the perfect image and likeness of God would naturally have a spirit exactly the same as God’s spirit – i.e. the Holy Spirit. The ideal model of our collective – i.e. God – never succumbs to temptation to evil, and we aspire to have that same spiritual strength. The substance of a perfect spirit, which contains only goodness, is belief in the covenant truth and its implications. Our spirits only become less than perfect when we allow evil into our spirits. The symbolic meaning of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the corruption of one’s naturally perfect spirit with a knowledge of evil. More specifically, it is the elimination of a man’s belief that his true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and that the implications of that true identity apply to him.

God commands Adam to “*cultivate and keep*” the Garden of Eden. Looking at the original Hebrew text, the word translated as “*cultivate*” means, at its most basic level, “to work.”^{xc} The work is likely not agricultural because man’s need to practice agriculture only begins in Genesis 3:17-19 as a corrective action for his sin. The clue to understanding the nature of the work that man is meant to perform, as commanded in Genesis 2:15-17, is in the Hebrew word that is translated as “*keep.*” That word can also mean “to guard, protect, or preserve.”^{xcii} Man is assigned the task of guarding the Garden of Eden, but God created the whole earth as an oasis of goodness/substance in an abyss of evil/emptiness. Why does an oasis created by God need to be protected by man? The Garden of Eden is not just a physical location but also a symbol of man’s uncorrupted spirit at that time. At the time of Genesis 2:15-17, man has a perfect spirit, and that spirit needs to be protected.

Man is to guard the Garden of Eden – i.e. his own spirit – from corruption by evil. Of course, God is stronger than evil, so evil cannot pollute any of God’s work, **except** for the one creation to which God gave free will: humanity. We have the ability to choose to allow evil into our spirits, and that free will means that we are a point of vulnerability in God’s creation. The work assigned to humanity is to guard our spirits from the intrusion of and corruption by evil. More specifically, we are to work the earth – i.e. this world and this life – into a form that best expresses, maintains, and strengthens that perfect spirit within those who have it and creates it in those who do not have it. Whether it is our personal relationships, our jobs, our societal institutions, etc., all of the aspects of this life and this world should be arranged and structured in such a way that they foster in all people the belief in the covenant truth and its implications.

Now, one may ask why God would require any work of humanity since God, in His infinite power, could simply prevent evil from having any access to humanity. Put another way, why create the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the first place? God desires a relationship of love with us, and authentic love can only be the product of free will. Furthermore, free will cannot exist in an environment where there is not more than one option available, and the creation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is an indication that God has given humanity free will. Therefore, if a man is to have free will, then only that man can be the ultimate guardian of his own spirit, and he must be free to choose to maintain the pure goodness of his natural spirit or corrupt it with evil.

Rest

The days of Creation end with Genesis 2:1-3:

The heavens, the earth, and all their vast array were finished. On the seventh day God finished his work which he had done; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. God blessed the seventh day, and made it holy, because he rested in it from all his work of creation which he had done.

This is an important passage because it indicates that God’s natural state is rest. Recall that in Genesis 1:2, before God began His work of Creation, “*God’s Spirit was hovering over the surface of the waters.*” The Hebrew word which is translated as “*hovering*” comes from a root that means “to be relaxed,” so “*hovering*,” in this context, is meant to connote motionlessness, like a mother hen brooding over her unhatched eggs.^{xcii,xciii} The Creation story establishes a frame for the days of God’s Creative activity. Before the days of Creative work begin, God’s Spirit is at rest, and after the days of Creative work end, God is again at rest. We can thus interpret that God’s natural state

of being – that is, His natural Spirit – is one of rest, and the days of Creation were an interlude of work during His otherwise restful existence. We can further interpret that God is not defined by His Creative work, for He was God before He began His work and after the work ended.

Understanding God's natural state of being is important because His natural state of being is also the state of being that is appropriate for us since our true identity is His perfect image and likeness. In short, we can infer that humanity is meant to exist in a state of rest, which includes both body and spirit because the spirit cannot be at rest if the body is not at rest. Specifically, we are meant to exist in a state of restful peace of mind that results from our belief in the covenant truth and its implications. That state of being accords with the preceding discussion^{xciv} of the “work” that God has assigned to humanity because the only job that God gives us is to guard our spirits from corruption by evil, which ruins that aforementioned peace of mind in us.

To be clear, the metaphor of a natural state of rest should not be taken too far because of course, performing acts of goodness is in keeping with our belief in our true identity in God, and God did not lack peace of mind when He was working to create the world. Furthermore, God does good work in our lives on a daily basis. Additionally, the job that God gave us to guard our spirits from corruption by evil includes structuring our lives and world in a way that creates and fosters in all people a spirit of belief in the covenant truth and its implications. My point here, though, is that humanity was not created for work that causes anguish in the spirit. That kind of work only comes into existence as a measure of corrective action from Yahweh to humanity in response to the introduction of sin into our spirits, lives, and world.^{xcv}

By allowing us to suffer the hardship of mental anguish resulting from labor, God tries to lead us back to belief in the covenant truth and its implications.^{xcvi} This is corrective action that we all need on a daily basis because we are all daily tempted to define ourselves – i.e. our value, our purpose, our well-being, and our standing before God – by our deeds and our careers. It is tempting to define ourselves by our deeds because they are sensory events, and we have a tendency to define reality by our sensory perceptions. Additionally, it is tempting to define ourselves by our careers because doing so uses the simple, superficial logic of working to achieve goals and in exchange for that work, receiving money to purchase the things that we need to live. However, defining ourselves in these ways only yields mental anguish rather than peace of mind. If your goodness – i.e. your value, your righteousness, etc. – is in your deeds, then you are only as good as your worst deed. If your goodness is in your performance on the job, then you are only as good as your worst mistake on the job. This model leads us to seek personal fulfillment by doing ever-increasing amounts of contrite deeds and working ever-increasing hours on the job. Yet, the sense of personal fulfillment that we desire never comes because we never forget our own failures.

By allowing us to suffer this mental anguish, though, God intends for us to realize the hopelessness and emptiness of defining ourselves by anything other than His judgment of us, which is that our true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness. Only in that definition of ourselves do we find eternal identity, self-worth, personal fulfillment, righteousness, hope, purpose, and well-being. Just as God was God both before and after His work of Creation, so too does our true identity in God and its implications transcend any deeds or job that we do.

The Creation of Woman

Genesis 2:18 gives the purpose of making two genders: “*Yahweh God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helper comparable to him.’*” To us, as Westerners, this statement does not explain anything, but to the Near Eastern mind, it clearly states the purpose. To reconcile the two viewpoints, we must first ask why it would not be good for the man to be alone. Remember that Near Eastern culture has a collective and externally-determined concept of identity.^{xcvii} One man does not make a collective nor can one man, alone in the world, be defined in that culture because his definition requires another person to give it to him and validate its presence in him.

Of course, we could rightly argue that the man is not alone at this point since God is present as well, and it is God Who gives us our true identity and validates our possession of it. However, man discerns God’s validation of his true identity only spiritually. Though God’s blessings to us are a sensory expression of God’s validation of our true identity, we only discern those blessings to be such validation in our minds. For instance, you may consider the food that you eat to be a blessing to you from God because He loves you as His perfect image and likeness in your true identity. Nevertheless, that is a conclusion that you draw in your own mind, for you did not see and hear God handing the food to you while speaking the words declaring your true identity in Him.

Given that humanity primarily defines and interprets reality by that which we can perceive with our five senses, we tend to attribute great significance to direct, sensory action that is undeniably meant to be validation of our true identity in God. In other words, it is easier to believe that your true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God when there is another person **speaking** words or **performing** actions that clearly and objectively validate that true identity to be in you. Satan’s entire goal is to deceive you into believing that you are not the perfect image and likeness of God in your true identity. If the only validation of your true identity in God comes in your spiritual perception of God, then it is easier for Satan to so deceive you than it would be if you also had people in your life speaking words and performing acts that clearly, objectively validate your true identity in God.

Adam has the true identity that is God’s perfect image and likeness, and he believes in it. However, he has no direct, sensory validation of that true identity because there are no other human beings present to so validate his possession of it. This is why it is not good for Adam to be alone because by being alone, his susceptibility to being deceived about his true identity increases. Even if Adam perceives the world around him to be a blessing that God has given him because of his true identity in God, there is no other person present to agree with him. Although, as Genesis

chapter three will show, simply having validating human company does not make a person immune to Satan's lies.

The second half of Genesis 2:18 is God's decision to make Adam a helper that is "comparable" to him. This helper is to help Adam remember and believe his true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God and its implications by validating that true identity in him in sensory ways. This is why the helper has to be comparable or "corresponding"^{xcviii} to Adam, for how can Adam be validated and assured that he is the perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity unless that validation comes from somebody else whom he believes shares that true identity? Adam's helper must be part of his collective, which is the collective of God, so that she can provide authentic external validation of his membership in that collective.

We also discern this purpose for Adam's helper in Genesis 2:19-20. Before creating woman, God first brings all the animals to Adam for him to name them. The concept of a name in ancient Hebrew does not just refer to somebody's appellation but also to his entire identity – i.e. his character, reputation, behavioral predispositions, etc. Furthermore, in ancient Hebrew, names have meaning.^{xcix} Thus, the implication of Adam naming all the animals is that he is effectively defining them, particularly as they relate to himself, but after naming them all, he realizes that none of the animals are like him. None of them share his true identity, so none of them are part of his collective. Therefore, Adam considers none of the animals to be qualified to validate him as being the perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity.

God then makes the woman, who will later be called "Eve," from one of Adam's ribs. The idea that the raw material of the woman comes from the man symbolizes the point that women share the same true identity as men: the perfect image and likeness of God. In fact, the original covenant in Genesis 1:26-27 emphasizes this point. Namely, the Scripture reads "*in God's image he created him; male and female he created them.*"^c The phrase "*male and female*" is an elaboration upon the nature of "*man*" in the sense that the word "*man*" can refer to all humanity.^{ci} Adam expresses his belief in the similarity between himself and the woman by saying "*this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. She will be called 'woman,' because she was taken out of Man.*"^{cii} "*Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh*" are figurative expressions meaning that Adam recognizes that the woman is like him. Also, the Hebrew words in this passage, translated as "*man*" and "*woman*," are very similar. The Hebrew word for "*woman*" is the feminine form of the Hebrew word for "*man*."^{ciii} Just as Adam defined all the animals by naming them, he also defines woman by calling her "*woman*." Specifically, he defines her as being like him – that is, as having the same true identity that he has.

Because he recognizes that Eve is like him, Adam also deeply loves her and desires her love in return. This circumstance is alluded to in Genesis 2:24, which states “*Therefore a man will leave his father and his mother, and will join with his wife, and they will be one flesh.*” In Near Eastern culture, children have the highest respect for their parents, and when a grown son marries, he often continues to live in his parents’ home with his own wife and children.^{civ,cv} Those facts seem to contradict the statement in Genesis 2:24, and that contradiction serves the point of the statement. Namely, the author is using exaggeration in the vein of a man so dearly loving his wife and desiring her love in return that he would even leave his parents to be with her. If need be, he would even commit the dishonorable behavior of forsaking his parents to have her love.^{cvi} Furthermore, the love between husband and wife is to be so strong that their union is akin to the two being a single person – i.e. “*one flesh.*”

Adam loves Eve because he recognizes that Eve has the same true identity that he has, and he desperately wants her to love him because that love, in all its sensory manifestations, will be an expression of her recognition that they both share that true identity. In other words, Eve’s love for Adam will validate and help him to believe that his true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God.

Sadly, many people interpret this story as being denigrating to women, but it is really meant to glorify women. First of all, in this story, woman is specifically confirmed to share the same true identity as man; she is just as much the perfect image and likeness of God in her true identity as is the man in his true identity. Additionally, man is described as having a spiritual vulnerability – i.e. a need for sensory validation that his true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. It is woman, out of all of God’s Creation, who has the ability to satisfy that vulnerability most effectively, and man values her immensely as a result.

The reason that Genesis 2:18-24 focuses upon the wife validating her husband is because the passage is about the circumstances necessitating the creation of woman, but the implication is not that the wife is not also validated in her true identity in God through the marriage. Of course, a husband’s love for his wife validates her true identity to be the perfect image and likeness of God. Indeed, in Ephesians 5:22-33, Paul explains that a husband is meant to love his wife for the purpose of validating her true identity in God.

Furthermore, the Near Eastern woman’s true identity in God is also validated through her bearing children in the marriage. A Near Eastern woman’s highest honor is to bear many children, particularly sons. When she is so fruitful, she is praised by all, her husband and his family see more value in her, her sons will show her the highest honor throughout their lives, and her sons will be her primary source of protection and provision in her later years. Additionally, having children

is a source of “social esteem”^{cvi} and femininity^{cvi} to a Near Eastern woman. Since it is God Who places babies with the women He chooses,^{cix} all of these benefits are means by which God shows His love for a woman and thus His validation that her true identity is His perfect image and likeness. Given that pregnancies occur through a woman’s union with her husband, he is part of that validation.

Moreover, it is important that a Christian who seeks marriage must only marry another Christian, for only a Christian spouse will recognize and validate your true identity to be the perfect image and likeness of God. However, your faith in God must be the primary reason that you believe in your true identity as His perfect image and likeness and the implications of it. Therefore, marriage is not a requirement for a Christian, for neither Jesus nor the apostle Paul were married.^{cx} In fact, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians chapter 7 about how married life can be a distraction from one’s Christian faith because each spouse can succumb to the temptation to focus upon pleasing the other spouse rather than focusing upon the matters of Christian faith. Although, that is not a flaw in the institution of marriage, as God designed it, but is rather a result of the spouses neglecting to make their Christian faith the top priority in their lives.

The Near Eastern Woman

cxi,cxii,cxiii,cxiv,cxv

A woman is meant to validate her husband’s true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God, and she is qualified to do that because she is also the perfect image and likeness of God in her true identity. That validation is expressed in the ways in which a wife honors her husband, for honor implies the recognition that the person you judge to be honorable is like you. That honor is also the way in which the wife will love her husband. Remember that love and honor have the same foundation, which is recognition of similarity to oneself, and to honor someone is to love him.^{cixvi} Indeed, a wife is meant to judge her husband to be honorable in their shared true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God. Therefore, the more that a man’s wife honors him, based upon her recognition of that shared true identity, the easier it is for that man to believe that his true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. Furthermore, the more completely and regularly that his wife honors him, the more perfect and permanent her husband believes his true identity in God to be.

Before continuing this exposition, I will be forthright and say that there is a prevailing belief among Near Eastern men that they are stronger – physically, intellectually, emotionally, etc. – than women. However, this is a perspective of men’s and women’s empirical identities only. The men

consider the women to be their equals in true identity, as evidenced by how much they desire love, honor, and validation from their womenfolk.

Keep in mind also that this feminine validation is not meant to come just from a man's wife but also from all of his womenfolk. A Near Eastern man's wife, daughters, mother, sisters, etc. symbolize for him his personal, private life, in which his honor in the judgment of people – namely, his womenfolk – is secure, for his womenfolk are meant to always judge him to be honorable and honor him accordingly. However, for the sake of brevity, I will restrict my focus in this section to the ways in which a wife honors her husband. Namely, a wife submits to her husband's decision-making, adroitly and conscientiously performs the domestic chores, bears him children (particularly sons), cares for his children properly, never complains, practices strict sexual morality, etc. Additionally, Proverbs 31:10-31 provides a list of the characteristics of an ideal wife.

In all of these behaviors, the wife acknowledges and respects the authority of her husband, and her obedience to his authority is an honor to him because it expresses her belief in the strength of his true identity. That honor is a validation of his true identity in God because she would not obey him if she did not perceive strength in his true identity that is equal to the strength that she perceives in her own true identity in God. It is important to note that a Near Eastern woman always has recourse to return to the home of her father or brother if she decides that her husband has become unsuitable.^{cxvii,cxviii} Therefore, the honor that she shows to her husband is definitely the product of her free will.

Indeed, while the ideal wife respects and obeys her husband's authority, it is important to understand that what the husband really desires is her **willing and joyful** respect for his authority. He wants his wife, and all of his womenfolk, to obey him not unwillingly, reluctantly, or begrudgingly but, rather, because they are pleased with him and pleased to be part of his household. He wants them to be pleased with him because they judge him to be honorable – that is, as strong in his true identity as they are in their same true identity. Remember, this honor from woman to man supports his belief that he has the same true identity, as the perfect image and likeness of God, that he believes her to possess.

Indeed, Hilma Granqvist writes about the Near Eastern region she studied, "The proverb says also: 'The woman is her husband's mirror,' which however can mean that the one face expresses the same as the other. If thy face smiles, it brings joy. If the wife's face is sour and angry, the husband gets bad tempered."^{cix} Because a man's womenfolk are meant to honor him, the happiness of his womenfolk is important to him, for if they are unhappy, then they may corrupt or interrupt their honoring of him. The happiness of a man's womenfolk connotes the honor that they show to him, so their happiness is itself an honor to him. If his womenfolk are unhappy, a man becomes "bad

tempered” because he interprets their unhappiness to be an unjust real or anticipated diminishment of the honor that he has in their judgment and of the honor that they show him.

As previously stated, a man’s womenfolk represent his personal, private life in which his honor in the judgment of people – namely, his womenfolk – is secure, and as a result, the validation of his true identity in God, and thus his belief in that true identity, are secure in that realm of life as well. The private realm of life contrasts with a man’s public realm of life because in his public life, his honor in the judgment of people is not secure, and therefore, the validation of his true identity in God, and thus his belief in that true identity, are not secure in the public realm of life either. Outside the home, a man is subject to virtually constant challenges to his honor in the judgment of people, and maintaining and increasing that honor comes only with great effort in social interaction. The public realm of life is very much a daily social battleground for a man, and the stress of that experience is why his private life is so valuable to him. His private life – i.e. his womenfolk – is his refuge from that stress. Accordingly, a Near Eastern man’s priority is to protect his womenfolk from exposure, literal or figurative, to public life.

The public realm of life is considered to be the domain of men, so a man can never have the same security of honor from another man as he can from his womenfolk. For example, a Near Eastern father is consistently honored by his son, but he does not consider the honor that he receives from his son to be as secure as the honor that he receives from his womenfolk. A son, as a man, is part of the public realm of life, where he may learn of any imperfections in his father’s public honor, and that discovery may negatively impact his judgment of his father. Because his son is not secluded from public life, like his wife and daughter are, the father considers the risk of that discovery to be much higher for his son than for his womenfolk. Of course, practically speaking, a Near Eastern son would never purposely dishonor his father, but the connotation of that risk is nevertheless present in the mind of the father by virtue of the son’s participation in the public realm of life.

A man does not want the public realm of life to mix with the private realm, represented by his womenfolk, because he believes that such a combination would risk compromising the honor that he has in the judgment of his womenfolk and the shows of honor that he is meant to receive from them. The imperative of keeping separate the public and private realms of life is the motivation for many of the characteristics of feminine life in the Near East. First and foremost, a woman must practice strict sexual morality, such that she does not have sexual intercourse with any man other than her husband nor have the reputation, whether accurate or inaccurate, for having done so. Indeed, many aspects of the ideal feminine life have the connotation of a woman’s sexual morality, and deviations from that ideal – i.e. any mixing of the public and private realms of her menfolk’s lives – connote her to be sexually immoral. These other aspects of feminine life that are meant to preserve a woman from public exposure include the varying degrees of restriction upon her

movement outside the confines of the home, restrictions upon her conversations with men, and the wearing of headscarves, veils, and other clothing that fully covers the body and conceals the curves of the body as much as possible.

It is important to understand that Near Eastern standards of feminine modesty are largely a matter of perspective. The practices of modesty often make no literal separation between the public and private realms of life but only reassure the man and the woman that such separation exists in the perspectives of the man, the woman, and the community. In other words, when a man sees his womenfolk behaving in accordance with the standard of feminine modesty to which he subscribes, that man feels assured that his honor in the judgment of his womenfolk is protected. Thus, he also perceives his womenfolk's validation of his true identity in God to be secure.

However, when that standard of modesty is transgressed by his womenfolk, the man perceives that his public life has intruded upon his private life and that his formerly secure honor in his private life is now just as variable and unreliable as is his honor in his public life. Admittedly, a woman doing something such as failing to wear a headscarf is unlikely to actually change her judgment of her husband, but the point is that such a transgression of feminine modesty **connotes** that outcome in the mind of her husband. Whether or not she actually begins to judge him to be dishonorable, he **believes** that she now judges him that way. By extension, his perception of that woman's validation of his true identity in God is corrupted, and his belief that he possesses that true identity is weakened as a result.

As Westerners, we may object to these standards of feminine modesty as being illogical and oppressive to women, but what is important to understand is that Near Eastern culture puts a very high value on the role of women. We may dislike the way in which that value is expressed and upheld, but we must not doubt that the Near Eastern man does, assuredly, recognize the importance of the women in his life. Indeed, as Dorothy Fahs Beck writes in her essay about change in the Middle East, "in former years the highest commendation one could give for a man's love for his spouse was to say: 'He will not even permit the sun to look upon her.'"^{cxx}

Furthermore, lest we get the idea that this feminine etiquette is resented by the women of the Near East, it is important to note that it is taught and enforced primarily by those very women amongst themselves. Indeed, these standards of modesty are earnestly embraced by Near Eastern women even from a young age.^{cxxi,cxxii} Additionally, I include here a quote from Adela Goodrich-Freer, a Western, Occidental female author who had the liberty to converse with Near Eastern women. Note that the word "hareem" refers to both the section of a house that is forbidden to male guests and the women who inhabit that section.

"I have often been asked in the old-fashioned hareems, how it is that our husbands should take so little pride in us, as to be willing to share the light of our countenance with every comer."^{cxxiii}

In other words, the Near Eastern women with whom the author conversed did not express admiration for the liberty of Western women but, rather, disgust. They perceived the free association between men and women that is common in Western society to be an insult to a woman's honor in the judgment of her husband. Therefore, it is clear that the mixing of the public and private realms of a man's life is not only considered by the man to be a dishonor to him but also considered by his womenfolk to be a dishonor to them. Hence, we can discern that Near Eastern women feel honored by the efforts that their menfolk make to seclude them from the public realm of life. That honor from the husbands fosters the maintenance and amplification of the wives' belief in their true identity in God, for a man honors his wife because he judges her to have the same true identity in God that he has.

With the foregoing context in mind, we can better interpret three Biblical passages that prescribe and proscribe certain behaviors for women.

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

² Now I praise you, brothers, that you remember me in all things, and hold firm the traditions, even as I delivered them to you. ³ But I would have you know that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴ Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head. ⁵ But every woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered dishonors her head. For it is one and the same thing as if she were shaved. ⁶ For if a woman is not covered, let her hair also be cut off. But if it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut off or be shaved, let her be covered. ⁷ For a man indeed ought not to have his head covered, because he is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of the man. ⁸ For man is not from woman, but woman from man; ⁹ for man wasn't created for the woman, but woman for the man. ¹⁰ For this cause the woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels.

¹¹ Nevertheless, neither is the woman independent of the man, nor the man independent of the woman, in the Lord. ¹² For as woman came from man, so a man also comes through a woman; but all things are from God. ¹³ Judge for yourselves. Is it appropriate that a woman pray to God unveiled? ¹⁴ Doesn't even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? ¹⁵ But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her, for her hair is given to her for a covering. ¹⁶ But if any man seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither do God's assemblies.

In this passage, Paul describes the Near Eastern practice of women wearing head coverings. A Near Eastern woman will regularly wear a head covering as an act of modesty.^{cxxiv} The practice of a woman covering her head is one of modesty because her hair is an element of her beauty that men would certainly notice, and a woman having exposed, free-flowing hair has the connotation – in the Near Eastern mind – of her being loose in regard to her sexual chastity. Therefore, having her head uncovered is to dishonor herself because the attendant implication of sexual promiscuity makes her intolerable as a wife, mother, daughter, etc. More to the point, a woman with her head uncovered in public mixes the public and private realms of life for her menfolk and thus compromises her menfolk’s perception of their honor in her judgment and of her validation of their true identity in God.

Paul justifies his words with the reasoning that it is not just women who must respect authority but also men, including Jesus. Namely, God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of man, and man is the head of woman. Paul purposely uses a play on the word “*head*” referring both to the anatomical head on one’s body and to the leader of a person or group. A man is the “*head*” of the women in his household in the sense that he has authority over them. God is the “*head*” of Christ, and Christ is the “*head*” of man, both in the same sense of authority.

It seems that some or all of the Corinthian congregation came to the conclusion that head coverings^{cxxv} for women are not necessary during times of congregational fellowship – i.e. prayer, prophesy, etc. In verses 11-12, Paul alludes to the logic that the Corinthians used in order to arrive at their conclusion. Namely, in Christian faith, we know that all people, men and women, have the same true identity that is the perfect image and likeness of God. Thus, if men and women are equal in the judgment of God in that way, then why do women have to wear head coverings and men do not? Paul clearly interprets the head covering to be a sign of the wearer being under some authority,^{cxxvi} so how can wearing a head covering be respect for authority in one instance but not in another?

Paul justifies that logic by writing that “*a man indeed ought not to have his head covered, because he is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of the man.*” In his book Sons of Ishmael: A Study of the Egyptian Bedouin, G.W. Murray recounts a story from the Near East in which a man refused to remove his turban at the command of a conquering enemy and so was killed by that enemy. Hence, there is the implication that a man removing his head covering in the presence of another man indicates the former’s submission to the latter’s authority.^{cxxvii} Therefore, by having his head uncovered during prayer, prophesy, and worship, a man expresses his submission to the authority of God and in doing so, honors – i.e. glorifies – God. Specifically, he obeys God because he considers himself to be the perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity and thus part of God’s collective, in which God is the ideal model.

Contrariwise, for a woman, a head covering indicates the separation of the public and private realms of life for her menfolk, which secures the perception of the honor that her menfolk – i.e. the authorities over her – have in her judgment. Since God is the head of all people and since He made man the head of women, then by extension, if a woman honors her menfolk by keeping her head covered, then she also honors God by doing so. While a woman, too, is the perfect image and likeness of God in her true identity, Paul’s point is that she is meant to honor God by honoring – i.e. glorifying – her menfolk. Therefore, she should wear a head covering while publicly praying and prophesying. Remember that God created women to help their menfolk remember and believe their true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God and its implications by validating that true identity in them in sensory ways.^{cxxviii} By keeping herself separated from the public realm of life, as symbolized by wearing a head covering, a woman preserves her menfolk’s perception of her validation of their true identity. Thus, by wearing a head covering, a woman submits not only to her husband but also to the will of God for her.

Paul’s emphasis upon properly honoring God within the context of Near Eastern feminine modesty is also indicated in his use of the phrase “*because of the angels*.” Paul could be referring to angels who deliver the messages that prophets are meant to utter, for those angels would be dissuaded from doing so if the women present behave badly by leaving their heads uncovered.^{cxxix} He could also be referring to a folk belief present in the Near East that every person has two angels that accompany him/her throughout his/her life. One angel records the person’s good deeds, and the other angel records the bad deeds. Those angels then report to God the deeds that the person has committed.^{cxxx} The implication here is that a woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered is a bad deed that will be reported to God. In other words, Paul’s meaning in alluding to that folk belief is that God wants women to wear head coverings.

Paul makes a final argument for the practice of head coverings that is essentially in the vein of “it’s just natural for women to wear head coverings.” He writes, “*Judge for yourselves. Is it appropriate that a woman pray to God unveiled? Doesn’t even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her, for her hair is given to her for a covering.*” Paul points out that long hair is considered praiseworthy to a woman, and hair is a natural head covering. To Paul’s mind, if it is a glory to a woman to have the covering that is long hair, then why is it objectionable to people for her to wear another head covering? After all, long hair resembles Near Eastern female head coverings in that both cover the head, excluding the face, and often flow down the back of the wearer.

Paul ends his discussion of this topic with the statement, “*But if any man seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither do God’s assemblies.*” In other words, Paul is preemptively abstaining from any further debate on this issue because he knows of no other congregation where

women would pray and prophesy without wearing head coverings. Paul effectively declares that he will not be swayed in his opinion on this matter. Remember, Paul is from the ancient Near Eastern culture in which the practice of head coverings on women is never disputed or challenged, so he cannot bring himself to agree with the abandonment of that practice. Indeed, he is probably flabbergasted that this matter is even a point of contention, for to his Near Eastern mind, a woman in mixed company without a head covering is unthinkable.

1 Timothy 2:11-15

¹¹ Let a woman learn in quietness with full submission. ¹² But I don't permit a woman to teach, nor to exercise authority over a man, but to be in quietness.

¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴ Adam wasn't deceived, but the woman, being deceived, has fallen into disobedience; ¹⁵ but she will be saved through her childbearing, if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with sobriety.

The reason that Paul does not allow women to teach men or be in any kind of position of authority over men is entirely based on ancient Near Eastern cultural standards. In other words, it is a matter of honor. First, a woman publicly teaching or commanding a man terribly dishonors that man because those behaviors portray him as being her equal or inferior. By Near Eastern cultural standards, men are to have authority over women because men are considered to be stronger – i.e. physically, intellectually, emotionally, etc. – than women in their empirical identities. Therefore, a woman exercising authority over a man, whether as a teacher or leader, is a public dishonor to that man because all the men who witness such behavior will judge him to be equal or inferior to a woman. That dishonor in the judgment of people will tempt that man to doubt his honor in the judgment of God and thus his true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God. Second, a woman behaving in this way dishonors herself because her bold public interaction with men implies that she is sexually promiscuous, which makes her intolerable as a wife, mother, daughter, etc. More to the point, though, for a woman to do those things in public breaks the Near Eastern etiquette that restricts conversation between men and women. In such behavior, a woman mixes the public and private realms of life for her menfolk and thus compromises their perception of their honor in her judgment and her validation of their true identity in God.

Paul uses Scriptural justification for his restrictions upon the roles of women by pointing out that man was created before woman and that the word of God first came to men. In other words, Paul believes that women should not teach nor command men because women only learn the word of God from men. He also notes that it was Eve, rather than Adam, who was deceived by the serpent – that is, she was the first of the two to be deceived – so again, why should woman be a teacher of man? Paul then indicates that Eve, as representative of all women, will be redeemed from her deception if the women who come after her – i.e. the offspring of Eve – “*continue in faith, love, and holiness with sobriety.*” He means that women can best express their repentance unto belief in

the covenant truth and its implications not by taking on public roles in the church but, rather, by simply having faith, practicing love, and behaving appropriately.

From these passages, it is easy to conclude that Paul is a misogynist, but that is not the case. As I wrote previously, Near Eastern men feel deeply honored by their womenfolk, and they want to maintain the inviolability of that honor. Whatever we, as Westerners, may think of gender relations in the Near East, the conclusion that Near Eastern men hate women or hold them in contempt is definitely incorrect. Paul's words about women in these passages, including his less-than-persuasive application of Scripture to justify his conclusions, really just express the fact that in the Greco-Roman world where he ministers, Paul is far outside his cultural "comfort zone." Women leaving their heads uncovered and publicly questioning, teaching, and commanding men are just too much for Paul to handle. Based on his Near Eastern cultural origin and perspective, Paul believes those practices to be just too dishonorable to countenance. As an analogy, to Paul's Near Eastern mind, the idea that women would have their heads uncovered in public is akin to a hypothetical proposal that modern-day women should not wear shirts in church. Such a proposal is instinctively reprehensible to our minds regardless of whether or not we can think of any Scriptural justification for rejecting it.

While we can now understand the context of Paul's teachings on the subject of women, the question that remains for us in modern times is whether or not Paul's prohibitions regarding women are applicable today in our churches. For the answer to that question, see the section titled "Ecumenism."

Divorce

Matthew 19:3-9

Pharisees came to him, testing him and saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason?"

He answered, "Haven't you read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall be joined to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh?' So that they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, don't let man tear apart."

They asked him, "Why then did Moses command us to give her a certificate of divorce and divorce her?"

He said to them, “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it has not been so. I tell you that whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and he who marries her when she is divorced commits adultery.”

In this passage, Jesus communicates a perspective of divorce that is quite extreme for His time and modern times as well. As the Pharisees express, the Law of God does permit divorce,^{cxxxii} but Jesus equates divorce with adultery, which is prohibited by the Law of God.^{cxxxii} Before understanding Jesus' meaning in this passage, we must first understand the significance of adultery to the Near Eastern mind. Namely, adultery is a terrible calamity in Near Eastern culture because in committing adultery, a woman brings the worst dishonor upon herself, her maiden family, her husband, and her children. Recall from the discussion above that a Near Eastern man considers the women in his life, including his wife, to be symbolic of his private life, in which his honor in the judgment of his womenfolk is secure. The wife who commits adultery has mixed the public and private realms of life for her menfolk, such that they no longer perceive their honor in her judgment to be secure. Indeed, they believe that honor to be severely corrupted.^{cxxxiii}

The substance of Jesus' opposition to divorce is that the Israelites interpret divorce to be a means of preventing adultery. Namely, if a man divorces his wife, then the subsequent marriages of the ex-spouses are not considered to be adultery. Jesus' point is that just labeling the situation "divorce" does not mean that the effects of adultery do not occur in these subsequent marriages. When we remember that a wife's role in marriage is to validate her husband's true identity in God by honoring him, Jesus' perspective makes perfect sense. For the length of time that a man is married to his wife, he ideally is consistently honored by her and thus consistently validated by her to be the perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity. When he ends the marriage through divorce, he loses that honor and validation, and the past honor and validation that he received from her becomes false and empty in his mind and likely in her mind as well.

In divorce, the husband's loss of honor in the judgment of his wife and her validation of his true identity in God is tantamount to the loss of honor and validation that occurs in literal adultery. In both cases – i.e. divorce and adultery – the man perceives that he has lost the honor that he once had in the judgment of his wife and thus also her validation that his true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. As a result, he doubts or disbelieves that he possesses that true identity. Jesus' point in saying that the man who divorces and marries another woman commits adultery is that in the divorce, he **brings upon himself** that terrible dishonor and loss of validation. Jesus references the Genesis chapter 2 story about the creation of woman precisely because that story expresses the deep longing that a man has for validation from his wife of his true identity in God and his great satisfaction from receiving that validation.

Jesus also accuses the man who marries a divorced woman of being an adulterer because His point is that such a man is a participant in and enabler of the former husband bringing the aforementioned effects of divorce upon himself. Namely, for as long as the divorced woman is married to a second husband, the original marriage cannot be reestablished, so the honor and validation that was lost by the first husband in the divorce cannot be recovered. Some people might argue that the wife may in the future be divorced from the second husband and then remarry the first husband. However, that divorce will then bring loss of honor and validation upon the second husband, and nevertheless, the Law of God specifically prohibits the remarriage of divorced spouses if after the divorce, the wife married a different man.^{cxxxiv} The justification for that prohibition is likely a desire to deter men from creating frivolous divorces based upon momentary anger.

Jesus' point is that the man who marries a divorced woman prevents her from remarrying her first husband in the future. Therefore, that new husband effectively seals forever the loss of honor and validation that the first husband experiences in the divorce. In that way, the new husband dishonors the first husband tantamount to having committed literal adultery with his wife. Similarly, Jesus says that the first husband commits adultery when he divorces his first wife **and marries another woman**. While polygamy is allowed under the Law of God, the vast majority of Israelites only have one wife at a time because having more than one is prohibitively expensive. Thus, when a divorced man marries a new wife, he effectively prevents himself from reconciling with his first wife. Therefore, the honor and validation from the first marriage is destroyed just as it would have been if literal adultery had occurred.

One technical point that bears mentioning is in reference to Jesus words, "*except for sexual immorality*." The temptation is to interpret that phrase to mean that divorce is righteous when a wife commits literal adultery, but that is not Jesus' meaning. Rather, remember that Jesus' logic in this passage is that divorce works dishonor and destruction of validation tantamount to that experienced in actual adultery. Where He says, "*except for sexual immorality*," He simply means that in cases of literal adultery, the dishonor and loss of validation has already been wrought even before the subsequent divorce occurs.

Moreover, Jesus' perspective is just as valid today as it was during His time on earth. I would venture to say that every divorced person would agree that his or her divorce brought him or her terrible emotional and spiritual hardship in the form of doubting his or her own value and worthiness as a person, at least temporarily. Divorce takes what was once exceptional esteem to each spouse and destroys it, and the effect is to cause the divorced person to doubt or disbelieve that he or she is valued by anybody, including a subsequent spouse and even God.

Of course, some people will object that there are situations in which divorce is the best option, such as regular bickering between the spouses. Jesus addresses that argument with the statement that “*Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it has not been so.*” Moses allowed the Israelites to divorce their wives because they had reasons for divorce that they considered to be sufficient as well. Some people may further object that there are extreme situations in which mere stubborn refusal to reconcile disagreements – i.e. “*hardness of hearts*” – is not the justification for divorce but rather something such as regular physical violence occurring between the spouses.

However, even if you deem your divorce to have been the best option given the circumstances, what about Jesus’ words is disproved? In that marriage, there were surely some good times in which you felt highly valued by your spouse, and now that you are divorced, that esteem has become false and empty. As a result, I would argue that no newly divorced person has a healthy perspective of himself or herself, as previously described. Thus, whatever problems the divorce solved, it created a lasting spiritual problem in you as well. You claim that divorce was your best option? Fair enough, but let’s not pretend that the divorce brought no negative effects of its own. The negative effect that divorce has upon your spirit is the reason why divorce was not part of God’s original design for humanity. That is why Jesus says of divorce, “*from the beginning it has not been so.*”

Fornication

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are expedient. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be brought under the power of anything. “Foods for the belly, and the belly for foods,” but God will bring to nothing both it and them. But the body is not for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. Now God raised up the Lord, and will also raise us up by his power. Don’t you know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be! Or don’t you know that he who is joined to a prostitute is one body? For, “The two,” he says, “will become one flesh.” But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit. Flee sexual immorality! “Every sin that a man does is outside the body,” but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or don’t you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. Therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.

The apostle Paul begins this passage by addressing a common deception that can accompany a relatively new Christian faith. Namely, when you realize that sin does not accurately express your true identity nor change it and that God has forgiven all your sins as a result, the temptation is then to conclude that you are empowered to commit any and all sins. You feel empowered to do whatever is pleasing in the moment; as Paul writes, “*foods for the belly, and the belly for foods.*” However, these conclusions are deceptions because while your behavior does not change God’s judgment of your true identity, it does affect your judgment of yourself. Your behavior makes it easier or harder for you to believe that your true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God and that your true identity is perfectly honorable in the judgment of God as a result.^{cxxxv} As Paul writes, “*‘All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are expedient. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be brought under the power of anything.*” Sin is not expedient for the purpose of having eternal life with God because it expresses, maintains, and amplifies your submission to the power of deception about yourself – i.e. deception about your true identity.^{cxxxvi}

Paul then transitions to a discussion of sexual immorality because one of the sins in which we can easily be tempted to engage is sexual immorality. Note that though Paul does use the specific example of visiting a prostitute, he is writing about all sexual activity that does not occur within a heterosexual marriage. Indeed, the Greek word which is translated as “*sexual immorality*” means “illicit sexual intercourse in general.”^{cxxxvii,cxxxviii}

Paul writes, “*But the body is not for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. Now God raised up the Lord, and will also raise us up by his power. Don’t you know that your bodies are members of Christ?*” Paul is emphasizing that in Christian faith, we are meant to know our true identity to permanently be the perfect image and likeness of God and permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God as a result. Such belief is eternal life with God – i.e. being “raised” by God. Where Paul writes, “*the Lord for the body*” and “*don’t you know that your bodies are members of Christ,*” he uses figurative language to convey the meaning that we are meant to identify ourselves – i.e. our “bodies” as referring to the totality of ourselves – with Jesus, namely the permanent true identity of humanity, as the perfect image and likeness of God, that Jesus manifested in His words, deeds, life, death, resurrection, and ascension.^{cxxxix} “*The body is not for sexual immorality*” precisely because sexual immorality expresses, maintains, and amplifies your doubt that your true identity is Yahweh’s perfect image and likeness.

In the act of sexual intercourse, ideally the woman’s happiness is obvious and unequivocal. Remember from the section titled “The Near Eastern Woman” that it is an honor to a man for his wife to be happy because her happiness connotes the honor that she shows to him consistently in their lives together. Furthermore, as also described in that section, the honor that a wife shows to

her husband is a validation of his true identity in God, so in the mind of her husband, sexual intercourse is the highest honor and validation of his true identity that she can show him because in it, her happiness is obvious and unequivocal. If sexual intercourse occurs as part of a marriage, then the man's honor and validation that is expressed in the sexual act endures even after the act is complete because his wife consistently honors him during their daily life together and is presumably routinely happy.

However, if the sexual intercourse occurs outside of a marriage, particularly with a prostitute, then all the honor and validation expressed in the sexual act ceases with the end of the act and thus becomes false and empty in the mind of the man. The man and the woman have no lasting relationship outside of the act in which the woman can consistently honor the man and display happiness to him. We can thus call such an experience "false honor" or "false validation" of a man's true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God. As Paul writes, "*Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body.*" By "body," he alludes to his previous statement "*that your bodies are members of Christ,*" which means that the Christian identifies himself with Jesus in that both he and Jesus are the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity. "*Every sin that a man does is outside the body*" in the sense that no sin is part of your true identity in God, "*but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body*" in the sense that sexual immorality damages a man's perception of his true identity in God because sexual immorality yields false honor and false validation of his true identity in God.

Of course, every sin expresses, maintains, and amplifies a man's deceived perspective of his true identity, but Paul's point is that sexual immorality has a more severe negative effect upon a man's spirit than does other sins. It has that worse effect because it corrupts the sexual act which is meant to be an extreme form of validation of a man's true identity in God within the context of a relationship – i.e. a marriage – in which such validation is meant to be secure.

Paul contrasts sexual intercourse with a prostitute – i.e. a joining of bodies – with faith in Jesus Christ – i.e. the joining of one's spirit to the spirit of Jesus Christ. Namely, the man of Christian faith accepts the spirit – i.e. the perspective – of Jesus as his own spirit. In other words, the man of Christian faith believes, as Jesus believed, that humanity's true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God and is perfectly honorable in the judgment of God as a result. Contrariwise, the man who has sexual intercourse with a prostitute imputes to himself, in his own mind, all the dishonor associated with the behavior of a prostitute, for in Near Eastern culture, a woman who is not chaste loses all of her honor in the judgment of people.^{cxl} As a result, it becomes much more difficult for the man to believe that his true identity is perfectly honorable in the judgment of God, and thus, it becomes much more difficult for him to believe that his true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God.

Paul continues, “*Or don’t you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God?*” The Holy Spirit – i.e. God’s Perspective – is that you are His perfect image and likeness in your true identity and perfectly honorable in your true identity in His judgment as a result. That Holy Spirit is in you – i.e. you are a temple of it – because as a Christian, you know and believe that true identity and honor about yourself. “*You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.*” You know that you are not your own, for you know that you belong to God precisely because you are part of His collective as His perfect image and likeness in your true identity. You know that to be true because Jesus’ death and resurrection – i.e. the “*price*” paid to convince you – are God’s testimony to the covenant truth and its implications. Accordingly, we must do everything we can to maintain and strengthen our belief in that true identity and the honor of it. Believing in both and behaving in ways that support such belief are glorification of God, for we honor God by believing and upholding that which He believes.

Some people may object that the foregoing explanation implicitly focuses only upon the spiritual implications of fornication for a man. They will ask, is a woman’s spirit not corrupted in fornication as well? Yes, it very much is. As I describe in the sections titled “The Creation of Woman” and “The Near Eastern Woman,” women derive validation of their true identity in God from marriage, so all of the foregoing discussion of sexual intercourse applies to women as well. The reason that Paul implicitly focuses upon men in this passage is that in both ancient Near Eastern and ancient Greco-Roman societies, the cultural standard was for female heterosexuality to occur only within the confines of a marriage whereas the cultural standard for male heterosexuality was more permissive.^{cxli,cxlii,cxliii,cxliv,cxlv} Therefore, Paul believed that the men in his audience needed to hear this message more than did women.

Finally, in modern Western culture, many people engage in long-term exclusive, romantic, and sexual relationships without marrying. They would likely argue that sexual intercourse in these relationships is spiritually healthy because the partners have a long-term relationship outside the sexual act in which they can consistently honor each other and thus validate their true identity in God. The real question, though, is whether that honor and validation are permanent. It is certainly possible that the relationship will last until death and thus be a practical marriage, but it is likely that it will not. When such a relationship ends, though, the spiritual effect is that of divorce, as described in the previous section.

Ultimately, sexual intercourse is meant to be restricted to literal marriages precisely because marriages are meant to be an institutions of **permanent** relationship. In a model marriage, the relationship is permanent, so the consistent honor and validation of true identity from and to the spouses is permanent as well. Cultivation of the spouses’ spirits of belief in the covenant truth and its implications is thus achieved, and corruption of their spirits is prevented. The problem is that

many people view the Christian restriction of sexual intercourse to marriage as an arbitrary rule to be evaded and overcome with rationalizations and secular laws. To the contrary, the Christian restrictions on sexual intercourse are for the protection of your accurate perspective of your true identity.

Homosexuality

Leviticus 18:22: “*You shall not lie with a man as with a woman. That is detestable.*”

Leviticus 20:13: “*If a man lies with a male, as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall surely be put to death. Their blood shall be upon themselves.*”

Romans 1:26-27: “*For this reason, God gave them up to vile passions. For their women changed the natural function into that which is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural function of the woman, burned in their lust toward one another, men doing what is inappropriate with men, and receiving in themselves the due penalty of their error.*”

Even without examining the context of those verses, we can immediately discern that the Bible speaks clearly against the practice of homosexuality, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. The passages all bluntly decry male homosexuality, and the passage from Romans expresses disapproval of some unnatural behavior by women, which likely includes the practice of homosexuality.

In Near Eastern society, male homosexuality does occur, and it is considered to be dishonorable behavior only for the participant who takes the passive role in the act whereas little to no dishonor is attributed to the participant who takes the active role. The reason for this difference is that the passive participant performs the role of a woman in the intercourse, and it is dishonorable for a man to take on a feminine role in any aspect of life.^{cxlvi} The Bible attributes this dishonor to both participants in homosexual intercourse, perhaps due to an assumption that every homosexual man will perform the feminine role on at least some occasions. It is dishonorable for a man to take on the role of a woman because by doing so, he conveys the impression that he has the weaknesses of women as compared to men, and as a result, men will judge him to be dishonorable. It is also dishonorable for a woman to take on the role of a man because by doing so, she conveys the impression that, like a man, she is a member of the public realm of life. That impression is a dishonor to her because it makes her unsuitable to be part of the private realm of life for her menfolk, and as a result, her menfolk will judge her to be dishonorable.

This dishonor in the judgment of people that comes from practicing homosexuality has a negative impact upon your spirit as well. Namely, the more dishonorable that you are in the judgment of people, the easier it is to believe that you are dishonorable in your true identity in the judgment of God. By extension, if you believe your true identity to be dishonorable in the judgment of God, then you cannot believe that your true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. While God does not judge your true identity to be unlike Him and dishonorable in His judgment, your

belief that He does make those judgments, and thus your disbelief that you have eternal life with God, are the spiritual dangers of engaging in homosexuality.

The Absence of Sin

Genesis chapter two concludes with verse 25: “*The man and his wife were both naked, and they were not ashamed.*” In Near Eastern culture, nakedness symbolizes shame in the sense of perceiving oneself to be judged by people to be dishonorable. The logic behind that symbolism is that the connotation of nakedness is the figurative **exposure** of a man’s dishonorable deeds to public knowledge.^{cxdvii,cxlviii} Remember, the Near Eastern concept of identity is externally-determined, so the Near Eastern man considers it imperative to hide his dishonorable deeds from public knowledge, lest the public learn of them and deem him to be dishonorable as a result. If the public judges him to be dishonorable, then he will be greatly tempted to judge himself to be dishonorable.

Verse 25 states that the man and woman are naked but not ashamed. The only way that nakedness can be combined with an absence of shame is if the naked individuals have no dishonorable deeds to hide, and that is the state of Adam and Eve at this time. They have not yet committed any sins. More significantly, the fact that Adam and Eve are not ashamed means that they believe themselves to be perfectly honorable in the judgment of God. As I will describe in greater detail in chapter 4, another word for dishonor in the judgment of God is sinfulness, and another word for honor in the judgment of God is righteousness. Thus, the state of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:25 is that they know themselves to be perfectly righteous in both empirical and true identity. That is, not only have they committed no sins, but they also do not doubt that they are the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity.

We may ask how Adam and Eve know that their true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, for Genesis chapters 1 and 2 do not describe God as telling it directly to them. In short, the reader has reason to assume that God did communicate it to them. First, there is no logic in Yahweh making humanity His perfect image and likeness in their true identity and then keeping that fact a secret from them. Such behavior would imply that Yahweh is unhappy with us having that true identity, but being omniscient and omnipotent, why then would Yahweh have given us that true identity to begin with if He knew that He would be unhappy with that arrangement?

Additionally, to the Near Eastern audience of the Bible, the words of Genesis 1:28-30 imply the awareness of Adam and Eve that they are the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity – i.e. that they are part of His collective and thus share His collective identity.

God blessed them. God said to them, “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” God said, “Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed, which is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree, which bears fruit yielding seed. It will be your food. To every animal of the earth, and to every bird of the sky, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is life, I have given every green herb for food;” and it was so.

The description here is akin to that of a Near Eastern man delegating management of his flocks and farmland to his adult son, and a man’s children know themselves to be part of his collective. Therefore, God’s commands to Adam and Eve in this passage have symbolic meaning, for they are His implicit communication to them that they are part of His collective, that their true identity is His perfect image and likeness, and that they are His children. Furthermore, since the advent of sin has not yet occurred, Adam and Eve have no reason to be deceived into believing that this situation will ever change, so in their perspective, they are permanently part of God’s collective, permanently the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity, and permanently God’s children.

Moreover, never forget that God loves us and wants us to love Him. God communicates the covenant truth to us because it is an expression of His love for us and the motivation upon which we love Him.^{cix} Furthermore, the implications of the covenant truth are also ways in which God shows His love for us. Even for those reasons alone, we can assume that God communicated the covenant truth and its implications to Adam and Eve and that He wants all humanity to understand and believe the covenant truth and its implications.

If sin had never entered the world, the Bible would end with Genesis 2:25, for the rest of the Bible is merely God’s attempt to remedy the effects of sin upon us. The rest of the Bible and all of our temporal lives on this earth are God’s attempt to lead us to believe the covenant truth and its implications so that we can have eternal life with God. This is why I call Genesis 1:26-27 not just the foundation but also the thesis statement of the whole Bible.^{cl} A thesis is “a position or proposition which a person advances and offers to maintain, or which is actually maintained by argument.”^{cli} Prior to the introduction of sin into the world, there was no need for the covenant truth and its implications to be proven, for Adam and Eve did not doubt either. With the introduction of sin into the world, humanity’s belief in the covenant truth and its implications is no

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longer perfect, so God endeavors to prove both to us. That proof is given in the Bible and in God's work in the life of every human being.

Chapter 4: Righteousness and Sin

Definitions

Thayer's Greek Lexicon defines the Greek word for righteousness as “the state of him who is such as he ought to be.”^{ciii} However, that definition is not very helpful because it does not define what a person ought to be. In other words, righteousness refers to a person’s conformity to some known standard, but what is that standard? In the context of the Bible and Christian faith, the way that humanity “ought to be” is the way that God deems we ought to be. After all, the Bible and Christianity are about God’s perspective of humanity and the effort to lead humanity to agree with His perspective. By God’s decree in Genesis 1:26-27, human righteousness – i.e. being the way that we “ought to be” – is to be like God, specifically the perfect image and likeness of God.

Righteousness has two dimensions in a person: soul and spirit. As I described in the section titled “The Name of God,” a man’s soul is his true identity that is the perfect image and likeness of God. As I will describe in the section titled “Humanity: God’s Collective, Revisited,” a man’s true identity in God – i.e. his soul – cannot change. Accordingly then, we have innate, permanent, and perfect righteousness in our true identity. Our permanent perfect righteousness is in our permanent true identity as God’s perfect image and likeness.

Contrariwise, a man’s spirit, which is part of his empirical identity, is variable. Our spirits should be identical to God’s Spirit – i.e. the Holy Spirit – and if sin had never entered the world, they always would be. We should have a perspective of God, people, and all existence that is the same as God’s perspective on those topics. However, our spirits vary, from moment to moment, in the degree to which they accord with the Spirit of God. To the extent that our spirits do accord with the Holy Spirit, we are righteous in our spirits. In short, the righteousness of our souls never changes, but the righteousness of our spirits does change. Significantly though, God is always righteous – that is, He is always as He deems He “ought to be” – in both spirit and soul because God’s empirical identity always accords with His true identity.^{ciii}

As Christians, one of the principles of our doctrine is that righteousness comes only through faith in God.^{cliv} Faith in God, specifically Christian faith in God, is the unification of the two aspects of your righteousness because in that faith, you have a spirit of sincere belief in that which God always believes: your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. Therefore, through Christian faith in God, your spirit becomes righteous, and a righteous spirit is

one that possesses sufficient Christian faith. Put another way, your righteousness of spirit comes from believing in your preexisting and permanent righteousness of soul.

Sin is the opposite of righteousness. Thayer's Greek Lexicon defines the Greek word for sin as “a failing to hit the mark.”^{clv} That mark refers to righteousness – i.e. being as we ought to be. To the extent that we fail to be as we ought to be – that is, fail to be the perfect image and likeness of God – we sin. As a technical linguistic note, the word “sin” can refer to both specific types of deeds and to the state of being that is the opposite of righteousness. In this book, I differentiate between the two meanings by using the word “sin” to refer to the former definition and the words “sinfulness” and “sinful” to refer to the latter definition. Namely, sinfulness is unlikeness to God, and that which is sinful is unlike God.

Contrary to righteousness, sinfulness has only one dimension in us. The standard of righteousness for humanity is being the perfect image and likeness of God. Since our true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, there can be no sinfulness in our true identity. Thus, the only dimension that sin can have in you is your empirical identity. You can have a spirit that is contrary to the Spirit of God regarding any number of topics, and such a spirit is sinful. God always believes the covenant truth, so sinfulness of spirit is, most specifically, your doubt or disbelief that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. Put another way, a sinful spirit is one of belief that your true identity is sinful, and thus, it is a spirit that has insufficient Christian faith.

At this point, you may be confused about these definitions of righteousness and sinfulness because you are accustomed to thinking of righteousness and sinfulness in terms of behaviors. We often speak of righteousness and sin as being deeds that are good or bad, respectively. We often conceive of righteousness as being obedience to God’s commands and sin as being disobedience to them. Of course, deeds are either righteous or sinful, but it is important to understand that any deed only expresses the spirit possessed by the person committing the deed. A man’s spirit motivates his behavior. The righteousness or sinfulness of any deed is not the deed itself but the belief or disbelief that motivates the deed, namely the belief or disbelief, respectively, in the covenant truth. Indeed, genuinely accidental righteous behavior and genuinely accidental sins do not exist. God’s will can be obeyed or disobeyed accidentally, but it is inaccurate to label such situations as “righteous behavior” or “sin,” respectively. Righteous behavior and sins must be motivated by a righteous spirit or a sinful spirit, respectively, and those spirits are absent in accidental behavior.

In other words, a man who commits a righteous deed must first have a perspective of righteousness that motivates the deed. In committing the deed, the man expresses his spirit of righteousness,

which is to say that he expresses his belief that his true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. Such a spirit is righteous – i.e. as God deems it ought to be – because it is in agreement with God’s Spirit. Namely, the man with a righteous spirit believes that he is part of the collective of God because of his true identity in God. Therefore, he obeys God’s commands because he knows that God would not command a member of His collective to do something that would be detrimental to him. Thus, a righteous deed expresses one’s spirit of belief that one’s true identity is righteous – i.e. as it ought to be according to God – and thus portrays one’s true identity as being righteous. Such a deed is therefore an accurate expression of one’s true identity because the true identity of all people is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and thus permanently perfectly righteous.

Contrariwise, a man who commits a sin must first have a perspective of sinfulness that motivates the deed. In committing the deed, the man expresses his spirit of sinfulness, which is to say that he expresses his disbelief that his true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. Such a spirit is sinful – i.e. not as God deems it ought to be – because it disagrees with God’s Spirit. Namely, as I will describe in greater detail in the section titled “The ‘Logic’ of Sin,” the man with a sinful spirit disobeys God’s commands because he has been deceived into believing that he is not currently part of God’s collective and that disobeying His commands will make him part of that collective. Therefore, a sin expresses one’s spirit of belief that one’s true identity is sinful – i.e. not as God deems it ought to be – and thus portrays one’s true identity as being sinful. Such a deed is thus an inaccurate expression of one’s true identity because the true identity of all people is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and thus permanently perfectly righteous.

Honor and Dishonor

clvi

In the section titled “The Near Eastern Concept of Identity,” I described the Near Eastern concepts of honor and dishonor, and now I will explain how those concepts relate to the concepts of righteousness and sinfulness.

I have already given definitions of righteousness and sinfulness in the previous section titled “Definitions,” but another way of defining those terms is to say that righteousness is the state of being judged by God to be strong, and sinfulness is the state of being judged by God to be weak. In other words, righteousness and honor are the same thing except that honor refers to a judgment that can be made by anybody whereas righteousness refers to a judgment made specifically by God. Put another way, righteousness is honor **in the judgment of God**. Likewise, sinfulness is the same thing as dishonor except that dishonor refers to a judgment that can be made by anybody whereas sinfulness refers to a judgment made specifically by God. Put another way, sinfulness is dishonor **in the judgment of God**. However, keep in mind that one man can judge another man to

be righteous or sinful because in doing so, he expresses his belief that God judges the man to be honorable or dishonorable, respectively.

The two sets of definitions for these terms are related. Being omniscient, God is always certain that He is perfectly strong, and as a result, He always judges Himself to be perfectly honorable. That is, God is permanently perfectly righteous. Furthermore, that perfect righteousness of God applies to both His true identity and His empirical identity because God's empirical identity always accords with His true identity.^{clvii} Recalling the definition of righteousness given in the "Definitions" section, the way that humanity "ought to be" is the perfect image and likeness of God, so by extension then, the way that we ought to be is perfectly strong and thus perfectly honorable in the judgment of God. To the extent that we are actually God's perfect image and likeness, we are perfectly strong and thus perfectly honorable in the judgment of God. After all, God cannot judge His perfect image and likeness to be any less strong, and thus any less honorable, than He judges Himself to be. Moreover, any person or thing being perfectly righteous necessarily implies that he or it is perfectly like God. Specifically, for God to judge that which is unlike Himself to be honorable is for God to implicitly judge Himself to be dishonorable, which is absurd.

Our true identity is innately and permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, so our true identity permanently has the full perfect strength of God. Accordingly, God judges our true identity to be permanently perfectly honorable and equally as honorable as He judges Himself to be. Therefore, in our true identity, we are permanently perfectly righteous by either definition of righteousness. Put another way, our permanent perfect righteousness is in our permanent true identity as God's perfect image and likeness.

Some people may object that humanity cannot possibly have strength equal to that of God, but such an objection forgets one key point. Human beings have the greatest strength possible, which is the favor of God that He always shows to us, for God uses all of His characteristics of strength^{clviii} for our benefit. God shows us His favor precisely because we are permanently part of His collective as His perfect image and likeness in our permanent true identity. Therefore, in that way, we do have strength equal to that of God in our true identity.

As previously described, while a man's true identity is permanently perfectly righteous, his empirical identity is sometimes righteous and sometimes sinful. That is, sometimes a man's spirit and behavior are judged by God to be strong, and sometimes they are judged by God to be weak. A spirit that is strong in the judgment of Yahweh is one that believes that which Yahweh believes and thus possesses sufficient Christian faith. Such a spirit is strong in God's judgment – i.e. righteous – precisely because it agrees with God's own Spirit, which is perfectly accurate, upheld by supreme power, and thus is perfectly strong. A spirit that is weak in the judgment of Yahweh is one that

disbelieves that which Yahweh believes and thus lacks sufficient Christian faith. Such a spirit is weak in God's judgment – i.e. sinful – precisely because it disagrees with God's own Spirit.

Righteous deeds express a righteous spirit, which is one of agreement with God's Perspective that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. Therefore, deeds resulting from a righteous spirit are judged by God to be strong – that is, they are righteous. Sins express a sinful spirit, which is one of disagreement with God's Perspective. A sinful spirit is belief that your true identity is not permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. Therefore, deeds resulting from a sinful spirit are judged by God to be weak – that is, they are sinful and thus are sins.

Since God is perfectly strong, He should have perfect honor in the judgment of all people. Furthermore, since all humanity has the strength of God in our permanent true identity, as His perfect image and likeness, the true identity of all people should have perfect honor in the judgment of all people. Such judgments are a righteous spirit, but of course, we do not always honor God or each other perfectly. Such failures are the product of a sinful spirit.

Moreover, righteousness – i.e. honor in the judgment of God – is the honor that the Near Eastern man desires the most. Indeed, honor is most valuable when it comes from somebody who is, himself, very honorable, for to be judged strong by somebody who is very strong and widely-believed to be so is more valuable than being judged strong by somebody who is weak and widely-believed to be so. God has the greatest strength and thus the greatest honor in the judgment of His people, so His evaluation of the strength of any person has the greatest significance. That is, God's judgments of strength are the most valid. Accordingly, if a man is certain that he is righteous – i.e. honorable in the judgment of God – in his true identity, then that man is perfectly secure in his perception of the strength of his true identity despite what people think of him or how they treat him. After all, if God judges you to be strong, and thus honorable, in your true identity and if God's judgment is the most important, then any human judgment of you to the contrary is wrong by definition and should be ignored.

On a final note about this topic, just as I wrote about the concepts of honor and dishonor in the section titled "The Near Eastern Concept of Identity," it is important to understand that righteousness and sinfulness are not necessarily strictly binary conditions. Unless I specify otherwise, my use of these terms should not be interpreted to apply in the extreme. That is, where I write of righteousness and sinfulness, those terms should only be understood as applying in the extreme if I specifically qualify them as "perfect," "total," or something similar.

Temptation vs. Righteousness and Sin

God tempts us to righteousness, and Satan tempts us to sinfulness. More specifically, God tempts us to believe that our true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness, and Satan tempts us to believe that we are not permanently the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity. By extension, God tempts us to believe that our true identity is permanently perfectly righteous whereas Satan tempts us to believe that our true identity is sinful. Of course, every tempting situation presents the opportunity to choose righteousness or sinfulness, but the point is that we should never interpret our exposure to the temptation to sinfulness to be an indication that Yahweh desires the outcome that we sin. Such an outcome is possible, but it is not God's desire. As is written in James 1:13, "*Let no man say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God," for God can't be tempted by evil, and he himself tempts no one.*" God tempts no one to sinfulness but only to righteousness.

Furthermore, temptations are only thoughts put into your mind by God or Satan for you to consider with their respective hopes that you will put those temptations into action. A temptation only becomes reality – that is, real spiritual righteousness or sinfulness – when you behave in accordance with that temptation. Sensory expression is the sign and confirmation that you have accepted the temptation as being true; it is the sign and confirmation that you have made the claims that compose the temptation part of your own spirit. Put another way, you believe those claims, and your commission of the corresponding deed manifests that belief.

James 1:14-15

*But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own lust and enticed.
Then the lust, when it has conceived, bears sin. [...]*

In this passage, the author makes a clear distinction between the temptation to sinfulness and actual sin. Significantly, the Greek word, which is here translated as "lust," can also be translated as simply "desire," with no implication about the morality of the thing desired.^{clix,clx} In other words, even if a man's desire is for something righteous, he can be tempted to fulfill that desire in a sinful way. Furthermore, it is important to note the phrase "*drawn away by his own lust and enticed*" because it implies deception by means of the man's desire.^{clix,clxii} In other words, it is not the man's desire that deceives him into sinning, but rather, Satan deceives a man into sinning by convincing him that committing a sin will bring him the fulfillment of his desire. A man is tempted to sin when he contemplates the possibility that behaving contrary to the commands of God – i.e. sinning – will fulfill his desire.

“Then the lust, when it has conceived, bears sin.” This obvious imagery of conception and childbirth is a metaphor for a man being deceived into sinning by Satan. The “conception” is the man succumbing to the deception in his mind from Satan that by sinning he can fulfill his desire, and the “birth” is the man actually committing the sinful deed. Sin does not occur in this whole sequence of events until the sinful deed is actually committed. Prior to that point, the sequence of events is only temptation to sinfulness.

Without sensory expression, thoughts in your mind of righteousness or sinfulness are merely temptations from God or Satan, respectively, that you are currently resisting. This distinction may seem overly technical and also unnecessary since, as we know, sin does not accurately express our true identity anyway.^{clxiii} However, I believe this to be an important distinction to understand because even when you resist Satan’s temptations upon you to sin, Satan will still tempt you further to believe that you are not the perfect image and likeness of God in your true identity simply because the temptations to sinfulness are in your mind, as if they are the product of your true identity.

Testing God, Testing Man

One variation on the definition of the Greek word for “tempt” is “test,”^{clxiv} and really the two definitions are equal because a temptation is a test by the tempter to determine if the one being tempted will succumb to the temptation. In the Old Testament, the word which is translated as “tempt” or “test” typically has the meaning of “test,” in the sense of experimentation.^{clxv} The Bible speaks of God testing man, but it also prohibits us from testing God.

In the Old Testament, the concept of God testing human beings is typically used in situations in which the human being has in some way failed, or may fail in the future, to uphold his faith in Yahweh. In fact, Moses describes the entirety of God’s Law as a test from Yahweh to us. In Exodus 20:20, after God delivers the first Ten Commandments of His Law to the Israelites, Moses says to them, *“Don’t be afraid, for God has come to test you, and that his fear may be before you, that you won’t sin.”*

That verse makes it clear that God’s Law is meant to lead the Israelites to righteous behavior, but the creation of commands from God to the Israelites also creates the possibility that the Israelites will transgress those commands. I will describe in detail the Near Eastern concept of divine fatalism in a later section, but for the moment, suffice it to say that Near Easterners often consider

God to be in control of all things that happen. In theory then, our transgression of God's Law – that is, our sins – would be attributable to God. Such a conclusion, though, is blasphemous.

The Near Eastern logical compromise to avoid that blasphemy is to present such a situation as a test from God because in a test, there is the option for a negative outcome. Thus, if God ordains His Law to be a test, then a negative outcome still upholds divine fatalism and the supreme authority and power of God without indicating that God directly causes sin to occur. By this clever reasoning, God is portrayed as having created a test that allows for a positive or negative outcome, so any negative outcomes – i.e. sins – are not an infringement upon God's will, authority, or power but only a demonstration of man's failure in the test.

The reader may observe that this is all an unnecessary rhetorical fiction, for why would anybody attribute man's commission of sins to God's will? Why would anybody claim that such sins surmount God's will when God gave humanity free will? Those are both valid points **from the Western perspective**, but from Moses' Near Eastern perspective, he must account for divine fatalism because the commands of the Law come from God. Characterizing as a test God's behavior or words that allow or put people into situations in which they can transgress His will is the tactic used by Biblical speakers and writers to account for divine fatalism in those situations.

Even though the Biblical writers portray God as testing humanity, Moses writes "*you shall not tempt Yahweh your God.*"^{clxvi} The reason that we are not supposed to test God is precisely because a test allows for the possibility of a negative outcome. We should never consider the possibility of a negative outcome from God, for God always knows and does what is best for us in any given situation because He never forgets that our true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness. Furthermore, testing God does not improve your faith in God, even when the test is successful. No amount of testing gives you knowledge of God's behavior in the future. God can fulfill every test you give Him today, but you still have to trust Him – i.e. have faith in Him – to help you tomorrow. Testing God is prohibited to us because it both expresses our weak faith in God and does nothing to strengthen that faith.

There are instances in the Bible of people testing God, and the fundamental problem in those instances is that the people have weak faith in God. For example, in the Book of Judges chapter 6, Gideon believes that God has called him to lead the Israelites in opposing the Midianites. However, his faith in God is weak, so he tests God to see if the calling is real and if God will actually support him in fulfilling that calling. Gideon uses tests involving a fleece of wool and whether or not God allows it to become damp with dew. Significantly though, Gideon administers the test a second time, with different conditions, even though the first test was successful. Administering the test twice only demonstrates the weakness of Gideon's faith and the futility of

testing God. After all, Gideon could test God on this matter one hundred times, and even if all of those tests are successful, Gideon will still have to **choose** to have faith in God to lead him to victory over the Midianites.

Granted, after administering the two tests, Gideon does go to battle with the Midianites in Judges 7:19-25, but the Scripture does not describe the tests as making Gideon confident prior to the battle. Quite to the contrary, Judges 7:10-11 indicates that Gideon is still afraid to go to battle.^{clxvii} It is only when Gideon clandestinely hears some of the Midianite soldiers expressing fear of him that he becomes confident about the upcoming battle.^{clxviii}

Genesis 3: How Sin Came Into the World

Chapter three of the Book of Genesis describes how sin came into the world and the life of humanity. First, recall from Genesis 2:9 that among all the trees that God places in the Garden of Eden, two are of special note: the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Tree of Life represents honor,^{clxix} and eating from it symbolizes knowing oneself to be honorable. Adam and Eve already know that their true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, so they already know themselves to be perfectly righteous – i.e. perfectly honorable in the judgment of God – in their true identity. Furthermore, they have no reason to believe that their true identity will ever change, so they believe themselves to be permanently perfectly righteous in their permanent true identity. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that they are already eating from the Tree of Life. Contrariwise, in Genesis 2:17, God commands “*you shall not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; for in the day that you eat of it, you will surely die.*”

This brings us to Genesis chapter 3, and I will start my analysis with verses 1-10:

¹ *Now the serpent was more subtle than any animal of the field which Yahweh God had made. He said to the woman, “Has God really said, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden’?”*

² *The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees of the garden, ³but not the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden. God has said, ‘You shall not eat of it. You shall not touch it, lest you die.’ ”*

⁴ *The serpent said to the woman, “You won’t really die,⁵ for God knows that in the day you eat it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*

⁶ When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took some of its fruit, and ate. Then she gave some to her husband with her, and he ate it, too.

⁷ Their eyes were opened, and they both knew that they were naked. They sewed fig leaves together, and made coverings for themselves.

⁹ Yahweh God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?”

¹⁰ The man said, “I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; so I hid myself.”

The serpent represents evil, and verse one describes it as “*more subtle than any animal of the field which Yahweh God had made.*” The Hebrew word, which is translated here as “*subtle*,” can also mean “*crafty, shrewd,*” and “*cunning.*”^{clxx} This is an important point because it lets the reader know that the serpent’s words cannot be taken at face value, and he should not be underestimated.

First, the serpent asks Eve if God really said that her and Adam cannot eat from **any** tree in the Garden of Eden, and she rightly corrects the serpent that God only forbade eating from the tree in the middle of the Garden, which Genesis 2:16-17 identifies as the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.^{clxxi,clxxii} This is the first shrewd tactic of the serpent. He asks a question that he knows has a negative answer specifically for the purpose of giving Eve the opportunity to correct him. Allowing her to correct him makes him seem harmless to her since she perceives that she has greater knowledge than he does. She perceives that she is more intelligent than the serpent, and that prideful frame of mind makes her more willing to consider herself more intelligent than God, as I will describe in a moment. Adam will have the same frame of mind when Eve communicates to him the serpent’s words.

The serpent’s next tactic is to assert to Eve that she will not really die if she eats from the tree and that God only said that would be the consequence because He does not want her to eat from the tree and become like God, knowing good and evil. The first indication that the serpent is lying in that statement is that he implies that God “knows” good and evil. Remember from the explanation in the section titled “The Work of Humanity” that the “knowledge” of good and evil, in this context, refers not to an intellectual, academic awareness but, rather, to a corruption of one’s naturally good spirit with evil. God has a Spirit of only goodness, so the implication that He “knows” both good and evil is another subtle deception tactic from the serpent. God is fully **aware** of evil, but His Spirit is **not corrupted** by evil. The serpent implies that God “knows” both good and evil because he wants to convince Eve that behaving contrary to God’s commands – i.e. doing something evil – is in keeping with the goal of becoming like God.

However, these deception tactics from the serpent are only distractions that he uses to conceal the really destructive lie contained within his statement in verse 5. The serpent says to Eve that if she eats from the tree, then she “*will be like God*,” and in that phrase lies the serpent’s most terrible and effective deception. By saying that Eve will be like God if she eats from the tree, the serpent implies that she is not **already like God**, and that is the fundamental and most heinous lie that evil communicates to humanity. Going back to Genesis 1:26-27, the true identity of humanity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, so Adam and Eve are **already like God** from the moment of their creation by God. The deceived perspective that evil attempts to work in all humanity is the belief that our true identity is not the perfect image and likeness of God but is rather unlike God. Belief in that lie is the spiritual motivation that causes every sin that humanity has ever and will ever commit, as I will describe in greater detail in the section titled “The ‘Logic’ of Sin.”

Furthermore, the serpent’s phrasing subtly implies that God supposedly lies about the effect of eating from the tree because He desires to maintain this supposed difference between Himself and humanity, for the serpent says that God “*knows*” that Eve will be like Him after she eats from the tree. The intended inference is that if God commands against the action that He supposedly knows will make Adam and Eve like Him, then He must know and believe that they are currently unlike Him, and He must desire that they continue to be unlike Him and thus continue to be dishonorable in His judgment. Of course, none of that is true, but the notion of that supposed opposition from God stirs the pride in Adam and Eve, such that they think themselves to be more intelligent than God because they discern the supposed deceit in the warning that God gave against eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Notice also that the serpent alludes to the Near Eastern concept of a collective, in which all the members share a collective identity as their true identity. Namely, the serpent conveys the impression that Eve will not die from eating because God knows that once she does eat, she will have the same true identity as Himself and thus will be part of His collective. The serpent’s implication is that by eating from the tree, Eve will be protected from God’s wrath because she will then be part of His collective. This logic only again masks the fundamental lie that Adam and Eve are not already the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity and thus already part of His collective.

In keeping with my exposition in the section titled “Temptation vs. Righteousness and Sin,” I would like to briefly point out that the serpent’s statement to Eve that eating from the tree will make her like God is the **temptation** that the serpent – i.e. evil – puts into her mind. It only becomes a **sin** when she believes that lie and puts that belief into sensory action by eating fruit from the tree. She also gives some of the fruit to Adam and presumably repeats to him the words that the serpent delivered to her.^{clxxiii} Adam believes the serpent’s lie and eats in accordance with

that belief. By eating from the tree, Adam and Eve manifest that, just as the name of the tree implies, their spirits, which were previously only good, have been corrupted by evil – that evil being their belief that they are not the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity. By eating from the tree, Adam and Eve demonstrate that they believe the lie from the serpent.

Furthermore, by believing themselves to be unlike God in their true identity, Adam and Eve also do not consider themselves to be perfectly honorable in the judgment of God – that is, perfectly righteous – in their true identity. Adam and Eve's perceived lack of perfect righteousness is the kind of death that God foretold, in Genesis 2:17, to be the consequence of eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. That perceived lack of perfect righteousness, and thus perceived transformation into at least some degree of sinfulness, in their true identity is expressed in Genesis 3:7 as Adam and Eve realizing that they are naked, which to the Near Eastern mind implies shame.^{clxxiv} At the end of Genesis chapter 2, before sin entered the world, Adam and Eve were both naked, but they were not ashamed. In Genesis 3:7, now that evil has corrupted their spirits, Adam and Eve both clearly demonstrate shame by making rudimentary garments to cover themselves – i.e. to symbolically cover their supposed unlikeness to God^{clxxv} – and by hiding themselves from God. Adam further demonstrates shame by stating that he is afraid of God. The source of their shame and fear is not the sin of eating from the tree but, rather, the belief that motivated that sin, namely their belief that their true identity is not as it “ought to be” – i.e. perfectly honorable in the judgment of God as the perfect image and likeness of God.

Corrective Action

In Genesis 3:16-19, God responds to the sin of Adam and Eve:

*To the woman he said,
“I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth.
You will bear children in pain.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you.”*

*To Adam he said,
“Because you have listened to your wife’s voice,
and have eaten from the tree,
about which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it,’
the ground is cursed for your sake.
You will eat from it with much labor all the days of your life.
It will yield thorns and thistles to you;
and you will eat the herb of the field.
You will eat bread by the sweat of your face until you return to the ground,*

*for you were taken out of it.
For you are dust,
and you shall return to dust.”*

The best term for this response is “corrective action” because God issues these decrees to correct the corrupted spirit in humanity. The question, then, is how do these decrees help to achieve the goal of correcting our spirits?

Remember, the sinfulness of spirit in Adam and Eve is that they do not believe that they are the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity, and as a result, they believe themselves to be sinful in their true identity. That deception is the foundation of the sins committed by every human being, for it is the deception that all human beings suffer at different times and to different degrees throughout our lives. In correcting this deception, God addresses the primary productive roles of men and women. While we, in modern society, may disagree with these role assignments, the ancient Israelites believed that the primary role of men was to work in agriculture and that the primary role of women was to be wives and mothers.

It makes sense that God addresses these roles in His corrective action to us because in our productive work in this life, we are greatly tempted to feel fully independent and self-sufficient. We are tempted to believe that we create our own strength and, thus, that we create the basis of our own honor in the judgment of people and in the judgment of God. Remember from the section titled “The Near Eastern Concept of Identity” that a Near Eastern man’s primary source of honor is his collective. Thus, any belief that a man creates his own honor results from his belief that he is not part of God’s collective but, rather, that he is part of his own, independent collective. Put another way, it results from his belief that his true identity is not the perfect image and likeness of God.

To combat that deception about our true identity, God decrees that the primary roles of men and women in this life will be difficult. Men will have to toil to produce crops, and women will suffer great pain in childbirth while still desiring to be married and have children. The logic here is that in this great difficulty, men and women will realize the weakness of their supposedly independent selves and will have no recourse but to appeal to God for help. God will help them, and, as a result of seeing God help them, they will be led to the correct beliefs that they are permanently part of God’s collective and that they are permanently His perfect image and likeness in their true identity. By extension, they will believe that they are permanently perfectly righteous in their true identity.

This corrective action applies to all humanity. While we do not all work in agriculture, our jobs are difficult, and childbirth is certainly still painful. Indeed, much of practical life is difficult and

stressful. We are meant to call upon God for help, and the help that He gives us is meant to lead us to faith in the covenant truth and its implications.

Furthermore, as God decrees in this passage from Genesis, death is the ultimate corrective action that He sends to all people – i.e. all people “*shall return to dust.*” Namely, in death, all the transient sources of honor in this life – i.e. family, career, wealth, etc. – vanish, and we are left with our belief, or lack thereof, that we are permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God – i.e. permanently perfectly righteous – solely because our true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness. As I will describe in greater detail in chapter 12 of this book, belief in your eternal perfect righteousness is eternal life with God.

God sends all humanity corrective action, both in pleasant and unpleasant forms, as a tool to lead us to create, renew, maintain, and/or strengthen our faith in the covenant truth. Remember that God wants us to believe the covenant truth because He wants us to love Him, and our belief in the covenant truth is the basis and motivation upon which we do love Him.^{clxxvi} By extension, since corrective action is a tool of faith in the covenant truth, it is also a tool of faith in the implications of that covenant truth. That is, corrective action also helps us to create, renew, maintain, and/or strengthen our faith in the implications of the covenant truth.

The nomenclature of corrective action is as follows. “Blessings” are pleasant corrective action, and “punishments” are unpleasant corrective action. Although, all types of corrective action from God are really blessings because they are all meant to help us in our faith, but for the moment, I will keep the rhetorical distinction between blessings and punishments for the sake of expositional clarity.

Blessings reward righteous behavior to encourage us to continue having a righteous spirit, and punishments censure sinful behavior to encourage us to change our minds – i.e. repent^{clxxvii} – unto a righteous spirit. In giving you a blessing, God either directly intervenes in your life in a pleasant way, or He simply allows you to enjoy the natural benefits of your righteous behavior. Either way, the blessing is meant to be a motivation to you to maintain and/or strengthen your faith in the covenant truth and its implications, for you are meant to discern that God rewards your righteous behavior and the preexisting faith that your righteous behavior expresses. In giving a punishment, God either directly intervenes in your life in an unpleasant way, or He simply allows you to suffer the natural consequences of your sinful behavior. Either way, the punishment is meant to be a motivation to you to create, renew, maintain, and/or strengthen your faith in the covenant truth and its implications, for you are meant to discern that God warns against your sinful behavior and the preexisting lack or insufficiency of faith that your sinful behavior expresses. God removes the punishment when your faith improves.^{clxxviii}

From the Near Eastern point of view, the corrective action that God delivers to His people is akin to the oversight that members of a collective practice with each other. For instance, family members closely observe the behavior of each other and issue verbal or nonverbal praise or criticism for that behavior. This typically occurs in the form of older members observing and guiding the behavior of younger members.^{clxxix,clxxx} The logic behind this oversight is that the family shares a collective identity and a collective honor that are ascribed to all those in the collective. The behavior of one family member reflects upon all the family members, so dishonorable behavior by one member is not tolerated by the other members. The same is true of God and humanity. As the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity, all humanity is part of God's collective and shares God's collective identity and collective honor. Therefore, God will not endlessly tolerate His people being dishonored, even if it is they who dishonor themselves. Rather, God will intervene with corrective action to lead us away from dishonor in His judgment – that is, away from having a sinful spirit and practicing sinful behaviors.

The logic of receiving a blessing for righteous behavior and a punishment for sinful behavior is acceptable to us until we observe the occasions in which people who are deep in sinfulness receive a blessing or in which people who behave righteously receive a punishment. While we feel comfortable ascribing the former situation to God's perfect grace, we often object to people suffering punishments seemingly unjustly. This is the classic question, "why do bad things happen to good people?" These situations particularly gall us when a person of overall righteous behavior suffers a hardship because of a sin committed by somebody else. The easy, albeit typically unsatisfying, explanation of that situation is that God's wisdom is perfect and that God works in mysterious ways. Those are accurate statements, and we should trust God's wisdom even when we do not understand it. However, the logic behind supposedly unjust blessings and punishments is not beyond our comprehension.

To begin, remember that blessings and punishments are not always easily discerned. For example, celebrity can seem like a blessing, but public exposure also brings one's wicked deeds to public knowledge. Therefore, what seemed like a blessing is actually a punishment. Furthermore, consider the case of Jesus. He suffered an extremely painful and humiliating death, which had the appearance of being a punishment from God. However, God vindicated Jesus by resurrecting Him from death and later bringing Him to eternal life in Heaven. Therefore, what seemed like a punishment is actually a great blessing.

Also, remember that all humanity is part of the same collective, so from the Near Eastern perspective, the righteous behavior or sin of one member of that collective reflects upon every member of that collective. In that sense, every member is responsible for the behavior of every member. Thus, corrective action, whether blessing or punishment, to any member is justified.

However, even from an individualistic point of view, blessings to people of very sinful behavior and punishments to people of very righteous behavior can be justified. Consider the case of a man of generally righteous behavior who suffers a hardship that is the immediate result of another person's sin or even a hardship that has no discernible cause. Such a hardship is still valuable and just corrective action to that person because every person commits some sins, even if they are unrelated to the cause of the particular hardship at hand. Thus, every person has less than perfect faith in the covenant truth and its implications. The hardship is meant to be an opportunity for that man to renew, maintain, and/or increase his faith. Furthermore, even in the case of a man who suffers a hardship despite not being able to think of any sin that he has committed of which he has yet to repent, the hardship is still an opportunity for him to improve his faith in God by staying strong in that faith despite the hardship. In other words, the strongest faith in God is faith which is not diminished by suffering. With improved faith, the man in either case should be confident that God will deliver him from the current and future hardships in the ways that He knows are best.

In the opposite scenario, if a man who is deep in sinful behavior receives a blessing, then that blessing is meant to lead him to develop strong faith in the covenant truth and its implications simply by demonstrating the stark contrast between his behavior and God's grace toward him. Namely, that man is meant to realize that his true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God despite his deeds, for God would not show grace to somebody – that is, He would not honor somebody – who is unlike Him. This man should thus repent unto strong belief that his true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and that all the implications of that true identity apply to him as well.

Really, none of us should be outraged by these situations because ultimately, the label “unjust blessing” can be used to describe the covenant truth and its implications, for none of us has done anything to **earn** our permanent true identity as God’s perfect image and likeness nor the things that it yields to us. God works in our lives for goodness only because He loves us and wants us to love Him. He feels that way solely because our true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness, by His own design.

When we think a punishment is unjustified, we often question God’s sense of justice. However, the perfection of God’s justice can be discerned in the very fact that He sends corrective action into the lives of all people. Namely, God would only send corrective action into the life of somebody whose spirit He wishes to correct. God would only work to lead a person to believe in the covenant truth and its implications if He believes that both apply to that person. The perfection of God’s justice is precisely **that** He consistently works to lead **all humanity** to that belief and thus to eternal life with Him. Indeed, consider the words of Proverbs 3:11-12:

*My son, don't despise Yahweh's discipline,
neither be weary of his correction;
for whom Yahweh loves, he corrects,
even as a father reproves the son in whom he delights.*

We can return now to the question, “why do bad things happen to good people?” First, it is important to understand that all people are ultimately “good people” because we all have the true identity that is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. Second, it is important to understand that hardships from God are ultimately good, not bad, things because they are meant to lead us to strong faith in that covenant truth about our true identity and its implications. Our meaning in that aforementioned question is really “why do unpleasant things happen to people who seem to have done nothing wrong?” The answer is simple. Hardships occur in the lives of **all** people because **all** people are less than perfect in their faith in the covenant truth and its implications – that is, all people are sinners – so all people can benefit from corrective action.

The Aftermath

In Genesis 3:22-24, the state of Adam and Eve after their sin is described:

²² *Yahweh God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand, and also take of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever—”* ²³ *Therefore Yahweh God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.* ²⁴ *So he drove out the man; and he placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.*

The troublesome part of that passage is in verse 22, “*Yahweh God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil.’*” It is troublesome because it contradicts what I wrote previously about the serpent’s lie being the implicit claim that Adam and Eve are not **already** like God. In verse 22, God seems to be saying that Adam and Eve have indeed **become** like Him through their sin, which implies that they were not previously like Him.

However, based on my research into Hebrew grammar and vocabulary, this troublesome statement can just as accurately be translated as “*Yahweh God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one out from [or out of] us, knowing good and evil’*” or “*Yahweh God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like more one [or ‘one-er’] than us, knowing good and evil.’*”^{clxxxi} The emphasis in the statement is former unity and new separation. The intended meaning in this statement is that man

has become **like** or **as if** he is separate and different from God – i.e. unique as compared to God. After all, what is it for a man to be “out from” a collective than for that man to be different from the collective members? What is it for a man to become “more one” or “one-er” compared to his original collective than for that man to now be a collective unto and with himself and distinct from his original collective? In other words, the man (and all humanity by implication) has become like one who was originally part of the collective of God but is now no longer part of it. The man has become like one who originally had the collective identity of God as his true identity but now has changed in his true identity.

Importantly though, the author makes the point that the man has only become **like** one who is different from God because man has not actually left the collective of God nor changed in his true identity, which is still the perfect image and likeness of God.^{clxxxii,clxxxiii,clxxxiv,clxxxv} Put another way, man has been **deceived** into no longer believing that he is the perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity. Accordingly and by extension, man has also been deceived into no longer believing that he is perfectly righteous in his true identity. Therefore, humanity’s spirit, which was previously only good, has been corrupted – that is, it has become a mixture of good and evil. As Genesis 3:22 puts it, man’s spirit has become of the nature of “*knowing good and evil*.” To be clear, the phrase “*knowing good and evil*” is a description of man’s now corrupted spirit, not a description of God’s still uncorrupted Spirit.^{clxxxvi} We thus also discern that while man’s spirit is affected by his sin, his true identity is not affected by it. Rather, his true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and thus is permanently perfectly righteous.

In all humility and transparency, though I have done ad hoc research into the subject as necessary for my study of the Bible, I would never assert myself to be an expert in the ancient Hebrew language. Thus, I would never dispute a translation in the Bible based solely upon my knowledge of ancient Hebrew. Rather, I will only dispute a translation if I have both a grammatical or lexical reason for the dispute **and** a contextual reason for the dispute.

I feel emboldened to give my alternate translations of Genesis 3:22 not just because of my research into the ancient Hebrew language but also because the “official” translation simply makes no sense in the context of the Creation story, of the Bible as a whole, nor of our own life experience. Remember what the serpent says to Eve in Genesis 3:4-5, “*You won’t really die, for God knows that in the day you eat it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*” The “official” translation of Genesis 3:22 has God effectively agreeing with that statement from the serpent, for in that verse, God says “*the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil.*” The serpent represents evil, so if God is in agreement with the serpent, then God is in agreement with evil. Remember from the explanation of the Creation story in chapter 3 of this book that evil is nothingness and emptiness whereas God is goodness and substance, as are all of the things that God has created. If God is in agreement with evil and if God cannot be deceived,

then God must be nothingness and emptiness – that is, God must be evil. Furthermore, God’s works of Creation, including humanity as God’s perfect image and likeness, must also be nothingness and emptiness – i.e. evil – from the moment of Creation.

If we accept the “official” translation of Genesis 3:22, then we invalidate the entire Creation story because that “official” translation effectively equates goodness, including God and humanity, with evil whereas the Creation story is all about a **separation** between good and evil. Also, if we accept that Adam and Eve became like God upon eating from the tree, then we must conclude that they were not already like God in Genesis 1:26-27, which means that God was a liar in that passage. If we are going to accept that good and evil – even God and evil – are equivalent or that God is a liar and evil is a truth-teller, then we might as well discard the entire Bible because these conclusions are diametric contradictions to the portrayals of God and evil in the Bible. Furthermore, these conclusions contradict our own sensory experience in life. We, as individuals and humanity as a whole, have experience with God that He communicates the truth and works goodness, and we also have experience with evil that it communicates falsehoods, works to destroy goodness, and yields only nothingness and emptiness. We also have experience with our own fundamental desire to be good and do good rather than to be evil and to do evil. Finally, we know this world to be fundamentally good, for it is the gift from God that helps sustain our biological lives.

In Genesis 3:22-24, God further decrees that humanity must exit the Garden of Eden lest man “*reach out his hand, and also take of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.*” As previously described, the Tree of Life symbolizes honor, and eating from the Tree of Life symbolizes a man’s belief that he is honorable. Prior to the introduction of sin, Adam and Eve know themselves to be the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity, and they have no reason to believe that their true identity will ever change. Therefore, prior to the introduction of sin, Adam and Eve presumably regularly eat from the Tree of Life because they believe that they are permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God – i.e. permanently perfectly righteous. As I will explain in greater detail in chapter 12 of this book, being certain of your permanent perfect righteousness is eternal life with God. Hence, prior to the introduction of sin, Adam and Eve presumably regularly eating from the Tree of Life also symbolizes their possession of eternal life with God.

After sinning, Adam and Eve disbelieve their true identity to be the perfect image and likeness of God and thus disbelieve their true identity to be perfectly righteous. This disbelief in one’s permanent perfect righteousness is the figurative death that God warns about in Genesis 2:17, saying “*you shall not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; for in the day that you eat of it, you will surely die.*”^{clxxxvii} Certainly, man’s true identity and the righteousness of it have not changed in Genesis chapter 3, but man’s perspective of himself has changed. Adam and Eve no longer believe themselves to be the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity, and

thus, they no longer believe themselves to have perfect righteousness. Accordingly, they lose eternal life with God until such time that they repent unto renewed belief in the covenant truth and its implications.

God banishing Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden so that they can no longer eat from the Tree of Life symbolizes not only their lost perception of their righteousness but also the totality of God's loving corrective action to humanity. Namely, God does not want us to continue to believe that our true identity is anything less than permanently His perfect image and likeness, and He does not want us to continue to believe that the righteousness of our true identity is anything less than perfect and permanent. This is why God says regarding the banishment of humanity from the Garden of Eden, "*lest he reach out his hand, and also take of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.*" That is, He does not want us to eat from the tree of life and "*live forever*" in a state of deception about the nature, source, and basis of our honor. Adam and Eve disbelieve their true identity to be the perfect image and likeness of God, so they disbelieve their true identity to be permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God – i.e. permanently perfectly righteous. If they now eat from the Tree of Life, then the symbolism would be that they will forever believe that their honor is less than perfect, comes from some other source than God, and/or comes from some other basis than their permanent true identity in God. Those beliefs are not only untrue but also prevent the acceptance of eternal life with God (and thus yield eternal condemnation) because eternal life with God is believing in your permanent perfect honor in the judgment of God – i.e. your permanent perfect righteousness – and that belief can only result from your belief that your true identity is permanently God's perfect image and likeness.

Therefore, God sends Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden and into a world where they must endure weakness and thus dishonor. Namely, Adam will toil for food, and Eve will give birth to children only with intense pain, as described in the previous section. The logic of God's corrective action of banishing humanity from the Garden of Eden is that we have this temporary life on earth as the opportunity to correct our corrupted spirits. That is, we have this temporary time on earth to abandon hope in the sources and bases of transient, false, and/or imperfect honor and instead believe in the source and basis for our permanent perfect honor. That source is God, and that basis is our permanent true identity as His perfect image and likeness. By extension, because eternal life with God is belief in your permanent perfect righteousness, we can also say that we have this temporary life on earth as the opportunity to accept eternal life with God.

Significantly, in the Genesis chapter 3 story, after the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, neither the Tree of Life nor the way to it are destroyed but only **guarded**. They are guarded from deception and falsehood. In other words, God wants us to know ourselves to be honorable but only if we know that we are permanently perfectly honorable in His judgment because our true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness.

Original Sin: God's Grudge?

Some people believe that the ongoing banishment of humanity from the Garden of Eden is evidence that God holds a grudge against us for our sins or for the original sin of Adam and Eve. After all, many people have repented of their sins since the banishment of Adam and Eve, so why does God not allow those people back into the Garden of Eden?

To begin, whether or not you believe that the Garden of Eden is a literal place, it does have figurative meaning. The Garden of Eden is a metaphor for a man's peace of mind that he is permanently perfectly righteous because his true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. By extension then, the Garden of Eden is a metaphor for "God's Kingdom" or "the Kingdom of Heaven."^{clxxxviii} Ever since humanity began believing the deception from evil about our true identity – that is, ever since the sin of Adam and Eve – we have been in a lifelong struggle to resist that deception. Sometimes we succeed in that resistance, but often we fail and sin. As a result, we typically do not have lasting peace of mind about our righteousness. The transience of that peace of mind is the meaning of the original sin of Adam and Eve being "inherited" by the rest of humanity. Such "inheritance" is not a blame for their wrongdoing that is transferred to us, but, rather, it is simply an acknowledgment of the fact that the deception to which Adam and Eve succumbed is a deception to which all human beings succumb in this life. Namely, we are all deceived, at different times and to different degrees, into believing that our true identity is not the perfect image and likeness of God and that we are thus not perfectly righteous in our true identity. We are not born with this deception, but we do quickly learn it, even from our formative years, from the sin in the world around us.

Thus, the ongoing banishment of humanity from the Garden of Eden does not symbolize a grudge that God holds against us but, rather, our ongoing deceived spirits and God's continuing effort to correct that deception in us. The whole point of having Christian faith is to correct and strengthen our spirits unto belief in the covenant truth and its implications so that we can have peace of mind that we are permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity. Indeed, having that peace of mind is the figurative re-entry into the Garden of Eden that is available to us; having that peace of mind is eternal life with God.^{clxxxix} Re-entry into the Garden of Eden – i.e. eternal life with God – is something that we have at any moment that we sincerely believe that we are permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity because our true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God.

Humanity: God's Collective, Revisited

I first discussed this topic in chapter 3 of this book, in reference to the Creation story, but now that sin is part of our lives, can we still say that we are part of God's collective? Can we still say that our true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God? Does God still consider us to have that true identity and the honor of it? Are we still perfectly righteous? The answer to all of those questions is most certainly, yes! The true identity that we have in God is permanent for all time; it does not change. For that reason, all the implications of our true identity are permanent as well.^{cxc} To be clear, all humanity is **permanently** the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity, and as a result, all humanity is **permanently** perfectly righteous in our true identity. Put another way, our permanent perfect righteousness is in our permanent true identity as God's perfect image and likeness.

How do we know that our true identity has not changed? To begin, as I describe in the previous two sections, the story in Genesis chapter 3 indicates that God still considers Adam and Eve to be His perfect image and likeness in their true identity – that is, part of His collective – even after they sin. Furthermore, from a purely deductive point of view, consider the alternative. Namely, if our true identity ceased to be God's perfect image and likeness because of our sins and if God holds our sins against our true identity, then why would God continue to love us, help us, and call us to repentance? This whole world was created by God purely for the benefit of humanity as His perfect image and likeness in our true identity. If we are no longer His perfect image and likeness in our true identity – that is, if God's entire purpose for creating all things has been lost – then why would God allow us to continue to live and thrive? Why would God perpetuate this world? Why would God call us to have faith in Him and His covenant truth? Why does God work corrective action in our lives to lead us to that faith? These are things that God would only do for **current** members of His collective – i.e. **current** sharers of His collective identity. Ultimately, the best foundation upon which we can be certain that our true identity in God (and thus its implications as well) never changes is that God never stops treating us like we are His perfect image and likeness in our true identity.

Additionally, being omniscient, God knew before He made humanity that we would sin, so He would not have proceeded to create us unless He knew that neither our sins nor anything else would change the true identity that He intended to give us. Put another way, God would not have created human beings that He knew would sin unless He forgave those sins in advance, and He would only have forgiven them in advance if He knew that they would not accurately express our true identity nor change our true identity. Therefore, our very existence is deductive proof that our true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God has not changed and cannot change.

The idea that a man's behavior and living circumstances do not affect his true identity can be hard for modern Western people to understand, but think of it in terms of this example. Most people considered Michael Jordan, at the height of his career, to be an excellent basketball player. However, if during that time, he missed one shot, would we have been justified in calling him a bad basketball player? Of course not. We could have made the argument, though, that an excellent basketball player should not and would not miss a shot, but we would not have thought to use that argument against Michael Jordan. Why? Because, Michael Jordan established himself in the minds of the public as an excellent basketball player, so any shot that he missed would not have been judged by us to be a genuine, valid expression of his athletic nature.

Similarly, God has established humanity, since Creation, as His perfect image and likeness in our true identity, so any of our behavior and living circumstances that are not befitting of that true identity are not judged by God, nor should be judged by us, to be genuine, valid expressions of our true identity. In the Spirit – i.e. the Perspective – of God, and ideally in the spirits of human beings as well, such behavior and living circumstances are irrelevant to our true identity.

Part of what allows the Near Easterner to believe the reality of his ideal self, despite his behavior and living circumstances to the contrary, is his psychology, which considers verbal expression – spoken or written – of an ideal as giving that ideal a significant degree of reality.^{cxxi,cxxii,cxxiii,cxxiv} Going back to the example of Michael Jordan, part of the reason that we would have easily dismissed the relevance of any missed shot is that the judgment that Michael Jordan is an excellent basketball player was commonly expressed by many people during the height of his career, including by experts in the sport of basketball. In other words, the regular expression of praise for his athletic abilities made the belief that he was an excellent basketball player all the easier to maintain.

Remember that in Near Eastern culture, identity is externally-determined such that a man believes that he has a given collective identity as his true identity typically only to the extent that other members of the given collective treat him – in word and deed – as having it. The same applies to a man believing that his true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. Of course, we do not always do a good job of treating people as having that true identity, and that imperfect public esteem is why it is critically important to recognize that God, Himself, always treats you like you are His perfect image and likeness in your true identity. That is, God always treats you like you are a member of His collective because He knows that you are permanently a member of it. That treatment takes the form of His work in your life, any visions that you have of/with Him,^{cxxv} and His words about all humanity that are recorded in the Bible. God is the ideal model of His collective, and if you have validation of your membership in a collective from the ideal model of the collective, then no other opinion should influence your perspective that you are a member of it.

Moreover, referring to the exposition in the section titled “The Original Covenant,” since humanity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity and since the substance of the original covenant of Genesis 1:26-27 is that relationship, then by definition, the original covenant is permanent as well. Indeed, the substance of the original covenant is expressed in multiple forms throughout the Bible, and that fact evinces the permanence of the original covenant. Furthermore, since our true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God has been ours since our Creation by God, we can also interpret that permanent true identity to be innate, intrinsic, and inherent in us.

The original covenant can never be voided or nullified. It can be broken through our sins in the sense that they are behaviors that do not befit our true identity because they express a spirit in us that disbelieves that true identity, but the covenant remains in force despite our disbelief in it and disregard for it. Indeed, the covenant between God and humanity is not just one aspect of Creation. It is the permanent organizing principle of all existence, for God created the entire world for the benefit of humanity because we, alone out of all Creation, are God’s perfect image and likeness in our true identity.

To understand the concept of an organizing principle, consider the following example. You have likely heard the old maxim, “crime doesn’t pay.” What we mean by that statement is that society is structured upon an expectation and enforcement of lawful behavior by all its members. While criminals may prosper in the short-term, we trust that society will not tolerate them in the long-term. We trust that criminals will be punished for their crimes, the victims will be vindicated, and the innocent will be exalted. Furthermore, the existence of crime does not cause us to deny our society to be lawful by nature. This is an example of an “organizing principle.”

The original covenant between God and humanity is the permanent organizing principle of all existence in that ultimately all things conform to that principle precisely because God established it and enforces it with His Supreme Power. God’s commands to us and His interventions in the world are not capricious. Sinful behavior is sin and brings hardship and anguish because it contradicts the principle that humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity. Righteous behavior is righteous and maintains and amplifies joy and fulfillment in Christian faith because such behavior conforms to the principle that humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity. In the short-term, sin may bring pleasure and righteous behavior may bring suffering, but as Christians, we trust that God will always correct these deviations from the organizing principle of all existence – i.e. deviations from the covenant truth – in the long-term.

Significantly though, as I discuss in chapter 12 of this book, the correction of these deviations comes perfectly, and often solely, in the spirit of the man who has strong Christian faith. In other

words, during our lifetimes, we do not see all evil and sin in the world brought to ruin, but because we have strong Christian faith, we are certain that evil and sin are ultimately emptiness, nothingness, and of no lasting effect precisely because they oppose the covenant truth from God. Despite the dishonor in the judgment of people that we may incur in this life, our Christian faith brings us certainty that our true identity is permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God – i.e. permanently perfectly righteous – because in our Christian faith, we know that our true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God.

The “Logic” of Sin

All sin is the product of deception worked upon us by evil. The story in Genesis chapter 3 directly portrays that cause and effect, but deductive logic also brings us to the same conclusion. All things being equal, a soul that is the perfect image and likeness of God would have a spirit exactly equal to the Spirit of God. In other words, our natural condition, as God’s perfect image and likeness in our true identity, is to understand and perceive things in the exact way that God understands and perceives them. Thus, the only logical explanation for the existence of sin in our lives is that we have been deceived by evil. Sometimes that deception is achieved simply by keeping a person from learning the covenant truth. This is the case with people who have never been exposed to Christianity. However, for those people who have been exposed to Christianity (and thus to the covenant truth), the implementation of the deception is more complex. It is the latter scenario that I focus upon in this section.

As the Genesis chapter 3 story demonstrates, evil first deceives you into believing that your true identity is not like God and thus is not righteous. With that false conclusion in your mind, evil then successfully deceives you into behaving contrary to God’s commands. The commission of the sin manifests your belief in the deception about your true identity and righteousness. After you have sinned, the fact that you committed the sin only reinforces your belief that your true identity is not like God and thus is not righteous, for the more that you behave contrary to God’s commands, the easier it is to believe that you are not part of His collective. After all, members of a collective should obey the commands from the ideal model of that collective since he knows best how members of that collective should behave.

Of course, that is the abstract, strategic description of evil’s work, but we should also examine evil’s direct tactics upon us to execute that strategy. Typically, temptation to sin begins when Satan calls to your attention some seemingly unjust earthly circumstance in your life, and that injustice seems to prove that your true identity is not like God. Sometimes the seemingly unjust circumstance is emergent whereas other times it has always existed, but only now do you recognize

the seemingly unjust nature of it and disbelieve your true identity in God because of it. Satan reasons in your mind that God is all-powerful, so the unjust circumstance in your life, which is a weakness to you, could not exist without God's creation or toleration of it.^{cxcvi} Therefore, you believe that God dishonors you through the unjust circumstance. Satan further falsely reasons in your mind that since God causes or tolerates this weakness in your life, your true identity must be unlike God, for God would not cause or tolerate weakness in your life – i.e. He would not supposedly dishonor you – if you were part of His collective and thus had His collective identity as your true identity. Satan also falsely asserts in your mind that your true identity must be dishonorable in God's judgment since it is supposedly unlike God.

As a follower of God, you previously believed your true identity to be the perfect image and likeness of God by His choice, you now think that true identity is unjustly withheld from you by God, and you desire to regain that true identity. By extension, you also believe that God unjustly withholds from you the perfect righteousness that you formerly had in your true identity, and you desire to regain it. You perceive your supposed lack of that true identity and righteousness to be the greatest injustice because God previously led you to believe that you possessed both.^{cxcvii} The unjust earthly circumstance that you notice is, to your mind, a manifestation of that greatest injustice. Evil's tactic is to tempt you to commit some sin by convincing you that the sin will actually make you the perfect image and likeness of God in your true identity and thus perfectly righteous in your true identity. The seeming "logic" of sinning is that perceived unlikeness to God in your true identity can be remedied by changing, by any means necessary, the unjust earthly circumstance that supposedly manifests that unlikeness to God. In that way, you think you can override God's supposed desire that you continue to be unlike Him in your true identity. You are thus further deceived into being prideful, such that you believe yourself to be more intelligent than God because you discern the supposed deceit in God's command against committing the sin in question.

In Genesis chapter 3, the serpent, which symbolizes evil, persuades Eve that she and Adam are not like God because they are prohibited by God from eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, an action that would supposedly make them like God. The further deceitful implication is that because they are supposedly unlike God in their true identity, their true identity is also dishonorable in God's judgment. They perceive these circumstances to be unjust because they formerly believed that their true identity was the perfect image and likeness of God, by His choice, and thus perfectly righteous. The serpent also convinces Eve that she and Adam can make themselves like God and thus honorable in His judgment by eating from the tree and thus having that knowledge of good and evil. In other words, the serpent convinces Eve to try to obtain righteousness by sinning. That is, she seeks to gain that which she once believed she possessed: a true identity that is the perfect image and likeness of God and the perfect righteousness of it. Since Eve gives some of the fruit to Adam to eat – presumably along with a reiteration of the serpent's words – the serpent indirectly convinces Adam to do the same as well. Adam and Eve thus become

prideful, such that they think themselves to be more intelligent than God because they discern the supposed deceit in the warning that God gave against eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

When Adam and Eve commit the sin of eating from the tree, that action manifests their belief in the lies from the serpent that they are not currently like God and that by committing the sin, they can become like God. Of course, the actual outcome is that after sinning, both Adam and Eve are only more convinced, than they were prior to sinning, that they are not like God and thus not righteous in true identity and empirical identity. This is why Adam and Eve make garments to cover themselves – i.e. symbolically cover their unlikeness to God – and hide themselves from God.

It is important to understand that the motivation for any sin is fundamentally the belief that your true identity is unlike God. After all, the only way that a follower of God would be willing to transgress God's commands is if he was deceived both that his true identity is unlike God and that transgressing God's commands will make him the perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity. Some people may argue that sins are motivated by the desire for sensory pleasures that result from the sins. While I agree that sensory pleasures do play a role in the motivation, the primary motivation is the belief that sin can make you the perfect image and likeness of God in your true identity. Genesis 3:6 states, "*When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took some of its fruit, and ate.*" Eve is attracted to the tree because of its delightful appearance and the succulence of its fruit, but Eve was surely already aware of those characteristics before the Genesis chapter 3 incident and yet did not eat from the tree. Eve only eats from the tree after she is deceived into believing that she is unlike God in her true identity and that eating the fruit will remedy that problem by giving her the knowledge/wisdom of good and evil that will supposedly make her the perfect image and likeness of God.

Let's now examine a practical example of how a person is led to sin. Of course, while all sin is the product of deception from evil, typically we do not have literal conversations with Satan. Rather, Satan's evil influence upon us masquerades as our own reasoning. Again, the progression to sin starts with you recognizing some seemingly unjust earthly circumstance in your life, and that injustice seems to prove that your true identity is not like God. For example, you notice that somebody possesses a material object that you want for yourself, and you believe that your lack of that object is a weakness to you. You conclude that your true identity must be unlike God, for you reason that God would not cause or tolerate this weakness in your life – i.e. He would not supposedly dishonor you – if you were part of His collective as His perfect image and likeness in your true identity. You also conclude that your true identity must be dishonorable in God's judgment since your true identity is supposedly unlike Him and because He supposedly dishonored you.

You are then tempted to steal the material object in order to make your true identity the perfect image and likeness of God and thus perfectly honorable in His judgment. The seeming “logic” of the sin here is that if the manifestation of your true identity being unlike God is your lack of the material object in question, then your possession of it, through any means, would be a manifestation of your true identity being the perfect image and likeness of God. Of course, stealing the object only makes you feel more unlike God and more unrighteous in your true identity because you have transgressed God’s command against stealing.^{cxcviii} Furthermore, any hardships that you bring upon yourself by committing the theft, such as arrest, imprisonment, and/or rebuke from community members, become additional reasons why you falsely believe that your true identity is unlike God and thus dishonorable in His judgment, for you believe that He further dishonors you with those hardships.

At this point, you may say that this reasoning that motivates sin is convoluted and contains multiple logical inconsistencies. Indeed, the reasoning that motivates sin is convoluted and illogical precisely because it is a deception from evil. If this reasoning was simple and direct, then temptation to sin would be easy to resist because the logical inconsistencies would be easy to identify. Furthermore, if this reasoning was perfectly logical, then it would not be falsehood but, rather, truth. To be clear, the entire foundation of sin is lies. We are deceived into disbelieving that we are permanently the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity and permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity as a result. Nevertheless, while the “logic” of sin is deceptive and false, it is the “logic” that evil often convinces us to follow in the heat of the moment when we believe that our true identity is unlike God and dishonorable in His judgment. Indeed, lies are most effective upon a person when he is in a state of spiritual distress.

There is no limit to the quantity or nature of the lies that evil tells us. Evil also imposes no requirement upon itself to be consistent in its lies or even to refrain from combining its lies with some elements of God’s truth in order to make the lies more believable. This is why Jesus calls the devil, who is the personification of evil, “*the father of lies.*”^{cxcix} In fact, the word “devil” comes from the Greek adjective which refers to one who is “prone to slander, slanderous, accusing falsely.”^{cc} Evil slanders us by deceiving us into believing that we are not the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity and thus that we are not perfectly righteous in our true identity.

Underneath all of Satan’s lies and temptations to which we succumb, the single desire that ultimately motivates us is the desire to be the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity and thus to be perfectly righteousness in our true identity. Some people may object that in the moment of sinning, the concepts of your true identity and God’s judgment of it are not the foremost thoughts in your mind, but the false reasoning and conclusions about both must be present in your mind at some level because otherwise, you would not sin. Indeed, the way to resist any temptation

to sin is to firmly believe the covenant truth that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. In that state of mind, you cannot believe that God ever judges your true identity to be dishonorable to any degree. Furthermore, if you believe that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, then you do not even consider the lie that sinning can bring you that true identity, for you have no need to acquire that which you already permanently possess. Therefore, sincere, strong belief in the covenant truth and its implications is immunity to the temptation to sin. Sadly though, we all regularly fall short of having that kind of perfect faith.

Externalization of Personal Perspective/Perception

One of the challenges for Western readers of the Bible is that we often fail to consider the Near Eastern psychology and philosophy of the very Near Eastern characters and writers of the Bible. As I have already described, righteousness and sin are both ultimately matters of the permanent true identity of all humanity and your perspective of it. However, there are some statements in the Bible that seem, to the Western reader, to indicate the exact opposite. They seem to describe a righteousness and a sinfulness that are entirely decreed by Jesus and/or God based solely upon the lifelong perfection of one's loyalty to Them. I provide two examples below:

Matthew 10:32-33: *“Everyone therefore who confesses me before men, I will also confess him before my Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies me before men, I will also deny him before my Father who is in heaven.”*

Luke 9:26: *“For whoever will be ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory, and the glory of the Father, and of the holy angels.”*

Both of those passages are the recorded words of Jesus, and they both sound, to the Western reader, to be very harsh, unforgiving, and even vindictive. However, if we simply take into account the Near Eastern psychology and philosophy of the very Near Eastern Jesus Christ, then we gain a completely different impression of these passages. Remember, Near Easterners have a concept of identity that is virtually entirely externally-determined.^{cc1} They believe, or at least are very tempted to believe, themselves to be that which other people judge them to be, and they discern that judgment from how other people treat them. Thus, it makes perfect sense that they would envisage and verbalize that concept with the imagery of somebody else pronouncing judgment upon a man. This is the imagery that is used in these passages. Furthermore, keep in mind that the context of both of these passages is Jesus encouraging His followers to remain strong in their faith in Him despite the earthly pressures to abandon it.

Knowing then that Near Easterners have this externally-determined sense of self, the correct way to interpret these passages is not as external judgments but as a man's perspective and perception of himself. In other words, these passages describe, **in an externalized way**, a man's perspective and perception of himself as being like God or not and honorable in the judgment of God or not. Jesus is preaching to His Near Eastern audience with phrasing that accords with their instinctive way of thinking. Jesus' followers recognize, as a result of His words and deeds, that Jesus is The Son of God, so they assume that Jesus has favor with God, just as any Near Eastern son ideally has favor with his father. The further assumption is that God will act upon the judgments that Jesus makes about any given person. Namely, if Jesus exalts a person before God, then God will exalt him, and if Jesus condemns a person before God, then God will condemn him. Therefore, the way that a Near Eastern follower of Jesus will conceive of himself as being honorable or dishonorable in the judgment of God is with the imagery of God's Son – i.e. Jesus – confessing him before God or denying and being ashamed of him before God.

However, it is important to keep in mind that Jesus is only referring to the externalized way in which His followers conceive of God's judgment of them. Jesus does not mean that either He or God ever consider any person to be sinful in his true identity. All that Jesus is really saying in these passages is that if you have faith in Him – that faith being expressed in public admission of it – then you are certain that you are perfectly righteous in your true identity and loved by God.

Contrariwise, if you do not have faith in Jesus – that lack of faith being expressed in forms of being ashamed of Him like denying Him in the presence of others – then you will believe yourself to be sinful in your true identity and rejected by God. Why is this the case? Quite simply, it is because God's love for you and judgment that you are permanently perfectly honorable is entirely based upon your permanent true identity as His perfect image and likeness, and that true identity, along with its implications, are the substance of Jesus' ministry. The covenant truth and its implications are delivered by Jesus in the clearest and most believable way, so if you do not have faith in Jesus' teachings, then you do not believe in your true identity in God and the implications of it.

In fact, Luke 9:26 contains a telling allusion to this sense of perspective and perception of oneself. Notice in that verse that Jesus says “[...] of him will the **Son of Man** be ashamed [...].”^{ccii} As I will describe in the section titled “Son of Man and Son of God,” Jesus as “The Son of Man” means that He represents the collective identity of humanity, which is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. Thus, for the Son of Man to be ashamed of you, means that the collective identity of humanity is ashamed of you. Translating that **externalized** concept of identity into the Western, internalized form, if you are ashamed of Jesus, then you do not believe that the collective identity of humanity belongs to you. In other words, you do not believe that your true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. Jesus says that the Son of Man will come “*in his glory, and the glory of the Father, and of the holy angels.*” If you do not believe that your true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, as Jesus preaches and manifests, then you will not know your

glory in the judgment of God. That is, you will not know your perfect righteousness in your true identity.

Additionally, the Biblical tendency toward externalization is not limited to a man's perspective and perception of himself but also includes his perspective and perception of other people and subjects. Any man with faith in God wants to believe that Yahweh agrees with his perspectives on other people and subjects, and some Biblical figures satisfy this desire by conceiving of Yahweh as having and speaking a perspective that agrees with their own perspectives. In other words, they validate their opinions by casting God as uttering those opinions.

It is important to understand that where the Bible describes Yahweh as **saying** something to a person, it often means that the person is having a dream or vision from which he discerns the Spirit – i.e. the Perspective – of God.^{cciii,cciv} We all know what dreams are, but a vision is best described as a waking state of deep contemplation upon some topic. These dreams and visions are what we Westerners would call “divine inspiration.” This is not to say that God **never** supernaturally speaks to people in the Bible with His audible voice nor that God is not involved in the conclusions a man reaches as a result of a dream or vision. Certainly, God does influence the thoughts of a man during a dream or vision, and that is why we can call them Yahweh-dreams and Yahweh-visions. Nevertheless, because a dream or vision takes place in the mind of a man, it only makes sense that the conclusions reached by that man as part of the dream or vision will also be influenced by that man’s prior knowledge about God, his current circumstances in life, his current mood, the principles of his culture, etc. In other words, it is reasonable to assume that Yahweh-visions and Yahweh-dreams contain some degree of the recipient’s externalization of his personal perspective and/or perception. Ultimately, it is justifiable to consider a dream or vision experienced by a Biblical figure to be an authentic representation of the Spirit of God if it expresses the covenant truth of Genesis 1:26-27 in some way.

We see an example of externalization of personal perspective and perception in the Yahweh-vision of Exodus 32:9-14, in which Moses has a vision of God regarding the Israelites having made a golden calf idol in Moses’ absence.

Yahweh said to Moses, “I have seen these people, and behold, they are a stiff-necked people. Now therefore leave me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them, and that I may consume them; and I will make of you a great nation.”

Moses begged Yahweh his God, and said, “Yahweh, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, that you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians talk, saying, ‘He brought them out for evil, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them

from the surface of the earth?’ Turn from your fierce wrath, and turn away from this evil against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of the sky, and all this land that I have spoken of I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’ ”

So Yahweh turned away from the evil which he said he would do to his people.

This passage is disturbing to read at first because it seems to indicate that Yahweh had evil intention toward His people and that Yahweh was not perfectly wise since Moses was able to convince Him to change His mind. However, what is really happening in this passage is Moses externalizing his personal perspective and perception. Moses is the one who is furious with the Israelites for having made the idol, hopes for their destruction, and is tempted to abandon them, but Moses imagines that such anger is expressed by Yahweh.

Moses goes on to supposedly convince Yahweh that it is righteous to forgive the Israelites and continue to guide them to the Promised Land. Again though, this is simply Moses projecting upon God his own mental processing of this incident. It is Moses who, though he is furious with their behavior, still loves the Israelites because they are still part of his collective, and he knows that his honor is tied to their honor for the same reason.

This externalization upon God of his own perspective and perception allows Moses to feel righteous in his sequence of emotions and thoughts on this matter. In other words, Moses validates the righteousness of his initial anger by thinking in terms of “even God is just as angry about the Israelites’ behavior as I am.” Moses then validates the righteousness of his repentance from that anger by thinking in terms of “but God’s anger would not last long because God knows that the Israelites are still part of His collective as His perfect image and likeness in their true identity and that His honor is thus linked to their honor.” This is why Moses “reasons” with God using the argument that if God now forsakes and destroys the Israelites, then that action will bring dishonor and disgrace, in the judgment of the Egyptians, upon the Israelites and, thus, upon God as well. Yahweh publicly claimed the Israelites as His people when He miraculously led them out of Egypt, so if He destroys them now, then the Egyptians will judge God to be dishonorable for having betrayed His people. Similarly, if God destroys the Israelites, then He will be breaking His promise, of progeny and land, to the Patriarchs (i.e. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel) and their descendants (i.e. the Israelites). The Patriarchs and their descendants are people whom God has previously claimed as His people by making the covenant expressions to the Patriarchs in the Book of Genesis.^{ccv} For God to now betray them would be for God to dishonor them and Himself.

This is all human reasoning on Moses' part, but Moses believes that God upholds this reasoning. Thus, Moses conceives of these thoughts in the form of a conversation with God in which God accepts and believes Moses' arguments. In other words, Moses externalizes his personal perspective and perception onto God because he believes that God shares that perspective and perception. Indeed, Moses' Yahweh-vision is in accordance with the Spirit of God because it expresses the covenant truth that God established and upholds. Namely, despite the Israelites' sin, God will not destroy them because they are still His perfect image and likeness in their true identity and thus still part of His collective.

Also, Yahweh's subsequent behavior demonstrates God's agreement with Moses' beliefs. Namely, God continues to show love and support for the Israelites despite their sins. If Moses' belief in the permanence of the Israelites' true identity in God was not shared by God, then God would not have continued to help the Israelites. The fact that the Israelites go on to eventually dwell in the abundant land of Canaan and grow more numerous proves that Moses' conclusions and his imputation of them to God is accurate and justified, for nothing can happen without God's active involvement or passive approval, which is a Near Eastern belief that I will explain in the next section.

Divine Fatalism

ccvi,ccvii,ccviii,ccix

Another aspect of Near Eastern psychology and philosophy that is important to understand is the belief in divine fatalism. To the Near Eastern mind, since God is omniscient and omnipotent, all things that happen must be within the scope of God's will. Put another way, Near Easterners believe that a man cannot do anything or experience anything that is contrary to the will of God. Everything that does happen must be the consequence of God's active involvement or, at the very least, of God's passive permission or tolerance. Thus, the Biblical speaker or writer sometimes deems it necessary to characterize positive and negative occurrences as choices made by God in accordance with His will.

A classic example of divine fatalism is in the Exodus story. While the Israelites are attempting to secure Pharaoh's permission to leave Egypt, Pharaoh frequently opposes their desire. More than once, the Bible characterizes Pharaoh's opposition as Yahweh "*hardening*" the heart of Pharaoh.^{ccx} To the Western reader of the Bible, this phrasing is very disturbing and nonsensical because it portrays God as working against His own will and against the Israelites. In other words, if God wants the Israelites to leave Egypt, why would He inspire resistance to that departure in the heart – i.e. the mind^{ccxi} – of Pharaoh? The answer is that the phrasing is simply an expression of the Near

Eastern belief in divine fatalism. Nothing can happen outside of God's will, so Pharaoh resisting the Israelites' departure would have to be part of God's will.

The Near Easterner needs no independent justification for this conclusion, for God's omniscience and omnipotence alone necessitate the conclusion. The Near Easterner does not perceive a logical discontinuity here simply because the dominant principle of logic is that everything that does occur is part of God's will. For the Near Easterner, logic is upheld in this phrasing about Pharaoh, despite God's desire for the Israelites to leave Egypt, simply because the phrasing expresses the fact that God is in control of all things.

Of course, this reasoning is unsatisfactory to the Western reader, but nevertheless, it was the reasoning of the people who wrote the Bible. Therefore, at the very least, the Western reader should feel permitted to overlook the logical discontinuity that **he** perceives here, for the Near Eastern author of Exodus most certainly did not intend any doctrinal implication in the phrasing other than the supremacy of God's will. Indeed, given that other verses in the Exodus story refer to Pharaoh hardening his own heart,^{cxxii} it is virtually certain that the two different versions of the phrasing were considered interchangeable in the mind of the author simply because even if divine fatalism is not directly expressed, it is implicitly understood by the Near Eastern audience that the author had in mind.

One consequence of the Near Eastern belief in divine fatalism is the equation of hardship with God's punishment and disfavor. These hardships can take multiple forms: injury, disability, illness, poverty, a bad reputation, etc. When a man suffers a hardship, that man and society in general are likely to conclude that God considers the man to be sinful because of some sin that the man or his relatives committed. They will further assume that God afflicts the man with the hardship as punishment for that sin. An example of this reasoning is John 9:1-3:

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Jesus answered, “This man didn’t sin, nor did his parents, but that the works of God might be revealed in him.”

We can see that in both the interpretation of the disciples and the interpretation of Jesus, the man's blindness is deemed to be the result of divine fatalism. They have different explanations for the blindness, but they all agree that it is part of God's will.

However, the concept of divine fatalism is not consistently applied in Near Eastern culture. While the sources that I cite in the heading of this section describe the Near Eastern belief in divine

fatalism, other sources present surprising findings. For instance, we might expect that a strict belief in divine fatalism would remove all ambition from a man. However, Gary S. Gregg cites a survey of Egyptians in which “a majority endorsed the view that a person’s life is determined mainly by his effort rather than ‘fate,’ saying they turn to God not in dependency but to strengthen their resolve in the face of obstacles.”^{ccxii} We might also expect that a belief in divine fatalism would free a man’s conscience of any responsibility for his deeds, but Hilma Granqvist, writing about the culture of a Near Eastern village, states:

A man, like an actor, must perform the part allotted to him, without altering it himself. Yet there is an important difference. An actor is not responsible for word or deed in the play he is acting in, whereas a man, acting the part of his own life, is responsible for each word and for all his actions.^{ccxiv}

The Near Eastern mind does not seem to wrestle with logical discontinuities regarding divine fatalism nor with inconsistencies in its application because Near Eastern speakers and writers tend to only focus upon the point that they are trying to make in any given moment without consideration for how that point or argument can conflict with other points or arguments.^{ccxv} For example, if he is speaking about the importance of a man practicing righteous behavior, then he will make use of the concept of man’s responsibility for his actions – i.e. man’s free will. If he is speaking about the importance of a man facing hardships with strong faith in God, then he will make use of the concept of divine fatalism. He will reason that because God is in control of all things, God must have caused or allowed the hardship to occur for some good and just reason. Furthermore, if it is God’s will that the suffering will end, then that relief will come in the time of God’s choosing. Alternatively, the speaker may cast the situation as a test from God because such a characterization accommodates both the concept of human responsibility and the concept of divine fatalism.^{ccxvi}

We also see the combination of divine fatalism and human free will in the Near Eastern perspective of the receipt of good things. By the concept of divine fatalism, all good things come only from God, but the Near Eastern custom of reciprocal generosity between people^{ccxvii,ccxviii} implies the recognition of human free will in the provision of at least some good things. Consider 1 Samuel 25:32-34.

David said to Abigail, “Blessed is Yahweh, the God of Israel, who sent you today to meet me! Blessed is your discretion, and blessed are you, who have kept me today from blood guiltiness, and from avenging myself with my own hand. For indeed, as Yahweh the God of Israel lives, who has withheld me from harming you, unless you had hurried and come to meet me, surely there wouldn’t have been left to Nabal by the morning light so much as one who urinates on a wall.”

The context of the passage is that Abigail has intervened to rectify an insult that her husband, Nabal, made against David. David was intent upon avenging himself by killing Nabal and his family, but Abigail convinces him to abate his anger. Had David killed Nabal and his family, he would have incurred a blood debt, so Abigail's intervention spared him that outcome. Notice that David declares that both Yahweh and Abigail are blessed – Abigail for remedying the insult and Yahweh for sending her to do so with perfect timing. Hence, David attributes his avoidance of a blood debt to both Abigail's mediation and to divine fatalism.

We know that God has given humanity free will and upholds it because He wants us to love Him, and genuine love can only be the product of free will.^{ccix} How, then, can divine fatalism also be true? To answer that question, consider this question, under what circumstances will most people consider human free will to be genuine? I think that most people would believe in the authenticity of free will only if human decision-making can be surprising to God. People would be satisfied with their free will if they believed that they can make choices that God does not expect. However, think of the implication of such a condition. If humanity can be surprising to God, then that would mean that humanity has a degree of power over God and a degree of knowledge that exceeds the knowledge of God. In that scenario, humanity's true identity would not be the perfect image and likeness of God but rather something greater than God. Ultimately, if human free will exists, then divine fatalism has to be true because if it is false, then the covenant truth is void.

Bless and Worship

Two words that are commonly used in the Bible and in Christian faith are “bless” and “worship,” so it is important that we understand their fundamental meanings. At a basic, sensory level, the Hebrew word for “bless” means “to kneel,”^{ccxx} and the Hebrew word for “worship” means “to bow down [or] prostrate oneself.”^{ccxi} While they differ in literal meaning, the two words agree in figurative meaning because they both convey the idea of submission to another person.

Admittedly, these gestures can be used to convey the impression of forced surrender, but that is not the intended meaning where the topic is the relationship between God and humanity. After all, the relationship between God and humanity is not one of forced domination but of love. Rather, the connotation intended by the words “bless” and “worship” is that of one party voluntarily and joyfully professing or demonstrating allegiance to another party. As allegiance is only given to a person who is considered to be strong, we can thus say that “blessing” and “worship” mean “to honor the object of the blessing or worship by professing or demonstrating allegiance to him.”

In the Bible, these demonstrations of allegiance take sensory form. God honors – i.e. blesses – humanity with an infinite variety of good gifts which maintain and enhance our physical, material,

and spiritual strength. Indeed, remember that all corrective action from God, both pleasant and unpleasant, is ultimately a blessing from God because it is meant to lead us to strong faith in the covenant truth. The covenant truth is the reason why we have God's allegiance, for God naturally supports the members of His collective. Therefore, a blessing to you from God is a manifestation of that allegiance, for God would only seek to lead you to believe the reason for His allegiance to you if that allegiance exists and He wants you to believe in it. Some people may object that if the Hebrew word for "blessing" has the connotations of kneeling before and submitting to another person, then it would be blasphemous to say that God blesses us, for Almighty God would neither kneel before nor submit to any human being. However, the kind of "kneeling" that God does for human beings is akin to the kneeling that a parent does for his child. Parents often kneel or bend down in front of their toddlers to talk to them, help them put on a coat, etc., and the action is always done in a spirit of great love for the child and a desire to help the child. These actions honor the child because they express the parent's allegiance to the child. Similarly, God's blessings to us honor us because they express God's allegiance to us. Neither in the case of a parent nor in the case of God is the one "kneeling" considered to be weak compared to the other party.

Of course, the most common Biblical usage of the word "bless" is in the context of God sending blessings to humanity, but the Bible also uses the word in the context of a human being blessing God. For instance, David writes in Psalm 103:1, "[...] *Bless the LORD, O my soul, And all that is within me, bless His holy name.*"^{ccxxii} Such a statement can be confusing to the reader who conceives of blessings as being supernatural material benefits, for how can a human being extend material benefits to God, Who makes all material things? However, when we understand the word "bless" to mean "to honor the object of the blessing with a profession or demonstration of allegiance," the verse makes perfect sense. Namely, David is expressing to himself, to God, and to the reader his allegiance to Yahweh. The inspiration for this profession of allegiance is David's contemplation of all the wonderful things that Yahweh does for people, and the majority of Psalm 103 consists of David listing those things. A man who has faith in God honors – i.e. blesses – God with praise, obedience, spreading of His word to others, etc., all of which express the man's allegiance to God.

Turning now to the concept of worship, we can also better understand the significance of that concept with the context above. Namely, we often associate the concept of worship with rituals, such as attending Sunday church services. While such rituals can be a form of worship, they are not the essence of worship. Consider the words of Jesus in John 4:21-24:

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship that which you don't know. We worship that which we know; for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour comes, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the

Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such to be his worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

In that passage, Jesus speaks with a Samaritan woman about the differences in rituals of worship of Yahweh that are practiced by the Jews and the Samaritans. While Jesus, as a Jewish Man, naturally upholds the superiority of Judaism over Samaritanism, He nevertheless indicates that worship of God is fundamentally not a matter of rituals and buildings but of perspective – i.e. spirit.^{ccxxiii} Jesus also says that “*God is spirit.*” That statement is hyperbole, for God is obviously more than just a perspective or thought. However, Jesus’ point is that God is best understood and perceived by His Spirit, for everything that God thinks, says, and does is an expression of His Spirit – i.e. His perspective – the substance of which is the covenant truth and its implications. Jesus says that true worship of God is done “*in spirit and truth,*” or in other words, the true worship of Yahweh is done by having a spirit – i.e. a perspective – of belief in both the covenant truth that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and the implications of that covenant truth. Put still another way, the true worship of Yahweh is done by having a spirit that is the same as His Spirit.

We do not say that God worships humanity because that phrasing sounds blasphemous to us. Nevertheless, everything that God thinks, says, and does is an expression of the covenant truth, and that covenant truth is the reason for God’s allegiance to us. God dedicates Himself to us because we are permanently members of His collective as the permanent perfect image and likeness of Him in our true identity. Furthermore, every act of worship that we do for God expresses our allegiance to Him, and our allegiance to Him is based upon our belief in that covenant truth. As Jesus says, “*the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.*” Indeed, the covenant truth is the foundation of all blessings and worship because they are sensory expressions of the allegiance between God and humanity, which is caused by the covenant truth that humanity’s true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. After all, members of the same collective are devoted to one another. This is also why our blessing and worship of God does not simply honor God but us as well. Namely, in those acts, we express our belief in our true identity in God and thus remind ourselves of our fundamental strength.

Chapter 5: The Law of God

Definition

In both Judaism and Christianity, the Law of God is a primary part of the doctrine, and to begin this explanation of the Law of God, I must first define the term. When I say "the Law of God," or just "the Law," I mean the list of behaviors that are designated as being righteous deeds or sins, but the content of that list can vary based upon the context in which the Law is described. There are three possibilities for the scope of that content.

First, the most narrow and formal definition of the Law of God is the commands of God to His people, through Moses, as recorded in the first five books of the Bible – i.e. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – which are also known collectively as the “Torah” or the “Pentateuch.” Second, at a broader level, the Law of God also includes the content of the rest of the Old Testament^{cxxiv} because it too expresses God’s Spirit, and it behooves God’s followers to think and behave in accordance with His Spirit. Furthermore, the Law of God, at this level, includes the teachings of New Testament Biblical figures, such as Jesus and Paul, because as Christians, we believe that they understood the Spirit of God as well. Although, many contemporaneous Jewish people rejected the teachings of these New Testament Biblical figures.

Third, at the broadest level, the Law of God also refers to the teachings of other prominent religious scholars in Judaism during Biblical times. In the Bible, these scholars have various titles, such as “elders,” “judges,”^{cxxv} and “prophets,” and in the Gospels, they are often referred to as scribes, rabbis, Pharisees, and priests. Their teachings include the written Law of God, as found in the Old Testament, but they also include the interpretations, elaborations, applications, and expositions of that written Law, and even additions to that written Law, by the prominent religious figures of the time. These religious scholars base their teachings upon a combination of the written Scriptures, teachings from their own, more prominent teachers, prevailing opinion among religious scholars, the customs and beliefs of their Near Eastern culture, and their own reasoning.^{cxxvi}

Some people may ask why the scholars of Biblical times include cultural customs and beliefs in their teachings about the Law of God. In the minds of the ancient Israelites, the customs and beliefs of their culture – i.e. the customs and beliefs that they consider to be honorable – have the implicit approval of God. The Israelites’ cultural customs and beliefs were established long ago, going back even to the time of their ancient Patriarch Abraham and likely further in the past.^{cxxvii}

Indeed, the Israelites consider themselves to be sharers of the collective identity of Abraham. They believe that the customs and beliefs of their culture must be in agreement with the Spirit of God since those customs and beliefs go back to Abraham, with whom God made a covenant expression.^{ccxxviii} The Israelites believe that God would not have made a covenant expression with a man whose customs and beliefs He considered to be dishonorable. Furthermore, the Israelites reason that God is in control of all things, so if the customs and beliefs of Israelite culture were contrary to God's Spirit, then God would not have allowed and helped the Israelites to last as long as they had.^{ccxxix} The continued endurance and growth of the Israelite congregation signifies to them God's implicit judgment that their customs and beliefs are honorable.

Therefore, the Biblical Israelites equate living circumstances and behavior that they judge to be honorable with righteous living circumstances and behavior. By the same logic, they also equate living circumstances and behavior that they judge to be dishonorable with sinful living circumstances and behavior – i.e. sins. By extension, Biblical Israelites equate, or at least are very tempted to equate, a man's honor or dishonor in the judgment of people, resulting from his living circumstances and behavior, with his honor or dishonor in the judgment of God – i.e. his righteousness or sinfulness, respectively. After all, if the Israelites, who practice the customs and beliefs of their culture, deem a man to be honorable, then he must be a faithful practitioner of those customs and beliefs, and therefore, the Israelites conclude that he must be honorable in the judgment of God. If they deem a man to be dishonorable, then he must not be a faithful practitioner of those customs and beliefs, and therefore, they conclude that he must be dishonorable in the judgment of God. Also, this logic works in reverse as well. Namely, the Israelites consider to be honorable or dishonorable, respectively, anyone whom they believe God judges to be honorable or dishonorable, for no Israelite wants to disagree with God's judgments.

Furthermore, while it is difficult for Americans to understand, given our cultural principle of separation between church and state, in the Near East, all of life is dictated or at least influenced by religion. Thus, it is important to understand that from the perspective of the Biblical characters and writers, all behaviors and living circumstances fall within the scope of God's Law, even if they are not directly referred to in the Bible. Indeed, consider this quote from Raphael Patai about Middle Eastern culture:

“All custom and tradition is basically religious; for whatever is old and customary and traditional is hallowed by religion, which itself is mainly tradition and custom and only to a small extent doctrine and law. Thus the entire field of custom – wide and infinitely ramified in its permeation of everyday life – cannot be divorced from religion either in theory or in practice. Whatever man does, he must always conform to custom, tradition, and religion. These three, then, religion, tradition, and custom, form an inseparable three-in-one constellation which rules the skies of Middle Eastern life.”^{ccxxx}

To be clear, the region that Mr. Patai refers to as the Middle East includes the region that I refer to as the Near East.^{cxxxii} Also, while he believes that religion “is mainly tradition and custom and only to a small extent doctrine and law,” I would argue that the doctrine and law of a Near Eastern religion is quite extensive precisely because they include many traditions and customs that the religion upholds.

Some people might argue that the teachings which exceed the content of the written Law of God do not qualify as part of the Law of God. While I agree that those teachings can be flawed and thus can be refuted through study of the rest of the Bible, it is important for us to understand that the average Israelite during Old and New Testament times is illiterate, does not have easy access to the written Scriptures, and/or does not have the free time to study those Scriptures.^{cxxxiii} The average Biblical Israelite learns on an intermittent and second-hand basis the Scriptures in general and the Law of God specifically. His teachers are, directly or indirectly, the prominent “religious scholars” of the day, and their instruction is given orally. Therefore, for the average Israelite in the time of Jesus, the Law of God is whatever those religious scholars say it is or imply it to be in their words and behavior. Again, I am not suggesting that all of the teachings of these scribes, rabbis, Pharisees, and priests formally qualify as the Law of God, but in order to properly understand the cultural environment in which Jesus lives and ministers, we must realize that for the average Israelite of the time, all of these teachings do qualify as the Law of God precisely because it is the prominent religious scholars who promulgate them.^{cxxxiv}

To provide a completely hypothetical example of my meaning, there is no command from God recorded in the Bible that says that a man **must** divorce a disobedient wife. However, according to the mores of Near Eastern culture, it is a dishonor to a man if his wife is publicly known or witnessed to be disobedient to him. If a group of scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees publicly discuss the topic of divorce, one of them might reference Genesis 3:16, where God says to Eve, “[...] *your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.*”^{cxxxv} That scholar might then conclude and say, based on that verse combined with prevailing Near Eastern customs, something like “a disobedient wife is in violation of God’s will and so she is worthy of being divorced.” Additionally, he might make this comment as a mocking response to a story about a man who did not divorce his disobedient wife. Whether the scholar gives this opinion as a formal, scholarly conclusion about the application of God’s Law or simply as a casual remark, his opinion will likely be accepted as legal fact by the uneducated in his audience and potentially also by the educated if they have enough respect for the scholar. His reputation as an esteemed religious scholar gives his words the authority of God in the minds of the Israelites. Furthermore, as the generations pass, if his opinion continues to be referenced, it will only gain credibility.

If I am an average Israelite of the time, with no independent knowledge of or access to the Scriptures, and if I, along with most people, regard these scholars as experts on the Law of God, then I might easily infer that the scholar's meaning is that God commands a husband to divorce his disobedient wife. I would then believe that it is sinful for a man to not divorce his disobedient wife. This conclusion would be all the easier to make given that Near Easterners, including those "religious scholars," look upon such a man as being dishonorable. In other words, we can see how a combination of the scholar's reputation, the audience's lack of education, and the cultural customs and beliefs upheld by the scholar and the audience can lead to flawed conclusions about the Law of God.

The Nature of the Law

ccxxxv,ccxxxvi,ccxxxvii,ccxxxviii

The Law of God, according to the definition given in the previous section, is largely, although not entirely, in accordance with the customs, psychology, and philosophy of ancient seminomadic Near Easterners, a category to which the Patriarchs of the Israelites belonged. Additionally, by the time of Moses, the Israelites had likely adopted some Egyptian customs as a result of their 430 year-long sojourn in Egypt.^{ccxxxix} The Biblical Israelites judge the customs, psychology, and philosophy of their ancestors to be honorable, so they also consider them to be honorable in the judgment of God – i.e. righteous – as previously described.

Of course, it is a bold supposition to say that the Law of God is not a completely novel creation, so how do I justify it? First, I refer you to the section titled "Why Study Near Eastern Culture?" Ancient Near Easterners, like many relatively modern Near Easterners, place heavy emphasis upon tradition and precedent. For them, philosophical principles, social customs, moral values, methods of performing different kinds of work, and virtually every other aspect of their lives are often the same as they were for their fathers, grandfathers, and generations far further in the past. For them, things are the way they are because they have always been that way. Precedent has honor and authority, including honor and authority from God because, as I described previously, the long-standing customs and beliefs of the Israelites are considered by the Israelites to have the implicit approval of God.^{cxl}

With that context in mind, can you imagine how the ancient Israelites would react if Moses brings them a Law full of commands that are completely new and different from their cultural heritage? They would not accept that Law nor Moses' leadership. Rather, Moses must bring them commands that already make sense to them. He must bring them commands, the large majority of which prescribe behavior that they already deem to be honorable.

Second, we must realize that where the Bible describes Yahweh as **telling** Moses the commands of the Law, we are usually meant to understand that Moses discerns the commands during a Yahweh-vision.^{cxxli} Given that the discernment of God's commands takes place in the mind of Moses, it only makes sense that the result of the discernment is expressed within the context of a combination of what Moses already knows about God's Spirit and the culture in which Moses lives. Remember that Yahweh-visions contain some degree of the recipient's externalization of his personal perspective and/or perception.^{cxxlii} Put another way, it makes sense that Moses discerns the commands from the **Most Honorable** Yahweh to be commands to behave in ways that ancient Near Eastern culture **already deems to be honorable**. After all, the Most Honorable Yahweh would not command the people of His collective – i.e. His perfect image and likeness in our true identity – to behave in any way that does not convey the impression of the strength of the collective and collective identity that they share with Him. The Most Honorable Yahweh would not command those who are His perfect image and likeness in their true identity to behave in any way other than honorably.

Some people may object that if the Law of God is discerned by Moses through visions, then how do we know that he discerns the actual commands of God and not just some creations of his own imagination? By the Near Eastern belief in divine fatalism, God is in control of all things, so the fact that God continues to wisely guide and protect the Israelites under Moses' leadership implies God's approval of the commands that Moses delivers to the people. Furthermore, the continued endurance, prosperity, and growth of the Israelite congregation when the people follow those commands, even after Moses' death, conveys the same impression. Finally, we can be sure that the Law of God is actually from God because it is an expression of and a tool of belief in the covenant truth and its implications, both of which God established and upholds.

Recall from the section titled "Faith" that faith in God is a spirit of belief in the covenant truth of Genesis 1:26-27 and its implications. The Law of God is a tool of faith in God because it is a tool of faith in the covenant truth and its implications. The implication that I will focus upon in this section is the righteousness that the covenant truth conveys to us. Your compliance with the Law of God expresses, maintains, and amplifies your belief in humanity's permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God whereas your disobedience of the Law of God expresses, maintains, and amplifies your disbelief in that true identity. Furthermore, because our true identity in God is the basis upon which we are permanently perfectly righteous – i.e. permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God^{cxxliii} – the Law of God is also a tool of faith in that righteousness. Your compliance with the Law of God expresses, maintains, and amplifies your belief in the permanent perfect righteousness of your permanent true identity whereas your disobedience of the Law of God expresses, maintains, and amplifies your disbelief in the righteousness of your true identity.

Jesus said, “*the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,*”^{ccxliv} and that statement applies to the entire Law of God, not just the commands about observance of the Sabbath. **This is a crucially important point to understand: the Law of God is not a standard that we have to meet in order to make ourselves like God in our true identity nor a standard that we must meet in order to cause God to love us and judge us to be honorable in our true identity.** Rather, the Law of God is a code of righteous behavior that is already and permanently befitting of us because of our preexisting, permanent, and perfectly righteous true identity as God’s perfect image and likeness. God does not command us to follow His Law in the hope that by it we will become righteous in our true identity but, rather, that by it, we will believe in the perfect righteousness that we already and forever have in our true identity. In that way, the Law of God is an expression of the original covenant from Genesis 1:26-27 and the righteousness that it conveys to us, as well as its other implications.

The mechanism or strategy by which the Law of God serves its purpose is the Near Eastern principle of reciprocation of honor. The Law of God commands behaviors with which human beings and God can all honor each other, and those behaviors are righteous deeds. The Law of God also prohibits behaviors with which we can all dishonor each other, and those behaviors are sins. This is why the Law of God largely accords with the preexisting ancient Israelite customs and traditions of honor, as previously described. The more that human beings are sensorially honored because of the recognition of our true identity in God, the easier it is for us to believe in that permanent true identity and thus in the permanent perfect righteousness of it. Recall from chapter 4 of this book that righteousness of spirit is believing that which God believes, and righteousness of behavior is behaving in accordance with that belief. God believes that all humanity is His perfect image and likeness in our permanent true identity and thus permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity. Ultimately, the test by which you can know if any activity is righteous or sinful, even if it is not directly mentioned in the Bible, is if the activity does or does not express, maintain, and amplify your belief that the true identity of all humanity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and that all humanity is thus permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity. Righteous behaviors are those that do, and sinful behaviors are those that do not.

While the foregoing exposition is a good summary of the strategy of the Law of God, that strategy deserves a more detailed explanation. The Near Eastern man’s concept of his identity is typically determined externally by what other people think of him, as expressed by how they treat him.^{ccxlv} Accordingly, Near Eastern culture has a tradition of reciprocation of honor in social interactions. As a Near Easterner, when you honor a man, you do or say something that conveys the impression that you believe him to be strong. You do this not only as an expression of your belief that he is strong but also as an expression of your belief that you are equally strong, for you are seeking to motivate him to proportionally honor you in return. You believe that you and he are equally strong, and you want him to convey the impression that he agrees with your perspective. You honoring the

other man creates, maintains, and/or amplifies his belief in his strength. Ideally, he will then reciprocate your behavior that honors him with behavior that equally honors you because he wants to foster the continuance of this relationship of reciprocal honor. That continual reciprocation will help you both to maintain or increase your belief in your strength.

The reverse is true as well. When you dishonor a man, you do or say something that conveys the impression that you believe him to be weak. This behavior not only expresses your belief that he is weak but also your belief that you are equally weak. These beliefs are deceptions that evil has worked in your spirit. Of course, your belief that you are weak may be only subconscious and perhaps masked by a superficial sense of superiority (which would also be part of the deception from evil), but it nevertheless governs your behavior toward the other person. Namely, when you dishonor another man, you motivate him to proportionally dishonor you in return because he will want to assert that you are no more honorable than him, and you would only seek to bring such dishonor upon yourself if you already consider yourself to be weak. You dishonoring the other man creates, maintains, and/or increases his belief in his weakness. If he believes that you and he are equally weak, then he will reciprocate your behavior that dishonors him with behavior that equally dishonors you. That reciprocation will foster the maintenance or increase of your belief in your weakness, and the cycle may continue.

In practicing a command of the Law of God, the practitioner expects that he would receive equal treatment from the other party if the situation was reversed and that he will receive correspondingly honorable treatment from the other party in reciprocation in the future. By treating somebody in the way that you think is befitting for him to treat you, you convey the impression that you consider him to be equally as strong as you. Specifically, you know your true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, which is perfectly strong because God is perfectly strong. Therefore, by honoring somebody through practice of the Law of God, you convey the impression that you believe that you and the other man have that same perfectly strong true identity in God. You also desire that the other man reciprocally convey the impression that he believes the same about himself and you. Such reciprocation of honor helps both parties to maintain or increase their belief in their true identity in God and the righteousness of it. Ultimately, that shared true identity as God's perfect image and likeness is the sole basis upon which you should honor every person because it is the perfect strength that every person permanently possesses by God's design. Significantly, that basis for honor is the same basis for love, and to honor a man is to love a man.^{cclvi} This is why Leviticus 19:18 states, “[...] you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Of course, this strategy of reciprocal honoring to yield confidence to the parties about their true identity as God's perfect image and likeness and the righteousness of it assumes that both parties have knowledge of and belief in the covenant truth and its implications. After all, obedience to the commands of the Law of God cannot inspire confidence in you about your true identity in God if

you do not believe that God designed you with that true identity. The Biblical Israelites, to whom Moses first delivers the Law of God, should know and believe that covenant truth, as should modern Jewish people, Christians, and all those who study the Bible. Regarding those who do not know the covenant truth and its implications, in Old Testament times, they learn it through interaction and dwelling with the Israelites, if they choose to do so.^{ccxlvii} Similarly, Christians, both ancient and modern, are called to educate the uninformed about the covenant truth and its implications.

Furthermore, the strategy of the Law of God depends upon the participants judging each other in accordance with only their true identity in God to the exclusion of all other criteria. Certainly, a man can misuse the Law of God by only employing it with certain people. Namely, a man may be tempted to judge his own and another man's strength not upon their true identity in God but, rather, upon their physical, economic, and social resources, but this is not the criteria that God intends for us to use. God commands those who consider themselves to be part of His people to behave according to His Law in their interactions with each other, so the criteria for honoring people in accordance with the Law cannot be any earthly circumstances since the earthly circumstances of people varies. Rather, God commands that we honor each other equally because He knows that we are all perfectly strong in our true identity as His perfect image and likeness, and we are meant to believe the same about ourselves and each other. We are meant to recognize that we are all part of the collective of God and so have the same perfectly strong collective identity of God as our true identity. Since the members of a Near Eastern collective seek to honor each other, the strategy and purpose of the Law of God can also be described as the expression, maintenance, and amplification of all people's belief that they are permanently part of the collective of God.

Indeed, the ordinances of the Law of God all command, in some way, the establishment, maintenance, and/or strengthening of relationships of mutual honor between people and between God and people. For example, some of the commandments direct people to be generous, and in Near Eastern culture, generosity is honorable and meant to be reciprocated.^{ccxlviii,ccxlix} In being generous, the giver honors the recipient by indicating, often publicly, that he wants to establish, maintain, and/or strengthen a positive relationship with the recipient because he believes the recipient is strong in the sense of being able to be reciprocally generous to him in the future. When that reciprocation occurs, the original giver will be similarly honored by the original recipient. Also, to be publicly known as a generous person brings a man public honor because people assume that he has the strength to be generous and also the strength that is the goodwill of the many people to whom he has been generous. They will be willing to reciprocally help him in the future. Of course, the Law of God is not ultimately about the exchange of goods and services, but generosity is commanded simply because it honors both parties and thus helps them to believe in their ultimate strength, which is their true identity in God and consequent membership in God's collective. Again, the Law of God only works its purpose if the people involved in the practice of it judge each other solely upon the fact that their true identity is permanently the perfect image and

likeness of God. Specifically to the concept of generosity, it is crucial that the giver and the recipient both understand that it is only because they are supported by God as members of His collective that they are able to be generous and helpful to each other.

Additionally, many commands in the Law of God are prohibitions, for God prohibits us from dishonoring each other. Nevertheless, the same recognition of shared true identity is operative in the proscriptions just as much as it is in the prescriptions. Namely, your motivation for not dishonoring a person is your recognition that he has the same perfectly strong true identity as you have: the perfect image and likeness of God. Hence, your choice to not dishonor somebody is an expression of your belief in his strength being equal to your strength and thus is an implicit act of honoring him. As a result, you also motivate him to reciprocally honor you – i.e. by refraining from dishonoring you – for the same reason.

It is important to note, though, that while the strategy of the Law of God is based upon the assumption of reciprocation of honor, practicing the commands of the Law still benefits a man's faith in the covenant truth and its implications even when reciprocal honor does not come to him from somebody whom he has honored. In that scenario, the Law of God still works as a kind of self-affirmation of the spirit within you that motivates you to comply with the Law in the first place. Sincere belief is expressed in word and deed, and having a record of behavior expressing such belief makes that belief seem all the more genuine, real, and accurate to you. Hence, even absent reciprocation, practicing the commands of the Law of God still expresses, maintains, and amplifies your belief in the covenant truth and its implications. Similarly, any sensory expression of Christian faith works in you maintenance and amplification of that faith even when no validation of the covenant truth and its implications comes to you from other people.

In other words, the more you behave like the perfect image and likeness of God should behave, the easier it is for you to believe that to be your true identity. That is, the more you acknowledge other people to be the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity, the easier it is for you to believe yourself to have that true identity. On the other hand, the more you behave contrary to that true identity, the harder it is to believe it to be your true identity. That is, the more exclusive you consider membership in God's collective to be, the harder it is for you to be certain that you are a member. Thus, even absent appropriate reciprocation of honor and validation from others of your membership, the Law of God is still a tool to help you have faith in your true identity in God and thus in its attendant righteousness.

Finally, the Law of God is not just about human beings honoring each other in furtherance of their belief in their true identity in God. It is also about human beings honoring God and being honored by God in furtherance of our belief in that true identity as well. Anytime you obey God's

commands, you honor God because you acknowledge His strength in the form of obeying His authority. Namely, you acknowledge that God's strength is the same strength that you have in your true identity as His perfect image and likeness. You obey God's authority because you know that He is the ideal model of the collective to which you both belong, so you trust that He knows best how you should behave. Anytime you honor another person, you effectively honor God as well because you honor that person as a result of your belief that all people are part of God's collective having his perfectly strong collective identity as their true identity. However, the Law of God also commands us to honor God in more direct ways, such as by having no gods but Yahweh^{ccl} and by refraining from misusing the name of God.^{ccli}

Of course, while God desires to be honored by us, His belief in His identity and perfect strength never wavers no matter how humanity treats Him. Rather, we honor God as an expression of our belief that in our true identity, we share God's perfectly strong collective identity, which is to say that by honoring God, we also honor ourselves. This motivation by which we honor God is expressed in the Law every time He is referred to by His Name, "Yahweh," such as "*You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.*"^{ccli} As I described in the section titled "The Name of God," the name "Yahweh" refers to the fact that God is the origin and substance of our true identity. Therefore, by definition, anything that we do to honor Yahweh is meant to be an expression of our belief in our true identity as His perfect image and likeness. By the principle of reciprocation, when we honor God, we expect that He will honor us in return and in doing so, validate that belief.

In honoring God, we desire and expect that He will reciprocate with honorable treatment of us to express His belief in our true identity in Him, and such treatment is pleasant corrective action from God to us. Indeed, the Law of God details the honor that we receive in reciprocation from Yahweh when we honor Him by obeying His commands. Namely, Moses states in Deuteronomy 28:1-2, "*It shall happen, if you shall listen diligently to Yahweh your God's voice, to observe to do all his commandments which I command you today, that Yahweh your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings will come upon you, and overtake you, if you listen to Yahweh your God's voice.*" The subsequent verses further describe those blessings.

However, when we disobey God's commands, we receive unpleasant corrective action from God. Moses states in Deuteronomy 28:15, "*But it shall come to pass, if you will not listen to Yahweh your God's voice, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come on you and overtake you.*" The subsequent verses further describe the unpleasant corrective action. Significantly, while we may be tempted to interpret "*these curses*" to be the means by which God dishonors us when we dishonor Him, they actually are an honor to us from Him, for He sends us this corrective action to lead us back to belief in, and behavior in accordance with, our permanent true identity as His perfect image and likeness and the

righteousness of it. In other words, God honors us even when we dishonor Him because He knows that despite our behavior, we are still perfectly strong in our true identity because our true identity is still His perfect image and likeness. Put another way, when you dishonor God with disobedience of His commands, He reciprocates by dishonoring only your sinful empirical identity – i.e. your spirit, behavior, and living circumstances – but only as a means of honoring your permanently perfectly righteous true identity by motivating you to change your empirical identity to match your true identity.

Because God has incorruptible belief that the true identity of all humanity is permanently His perfect image and likeness, no matter how much we dishonor God, He cannot be motivated to dishonor our true identity in reciprocation. Rather, He seeks only to lead us to believe in our true identity in Him and the righteousness of it. Indeed, that goal is expressed in Deuteronomy 30:1-6:

*It shall happen, when all these things have come on you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you shall call them to mind among all the nations where Yahweh your God has driven you, and return to Yahweh your God and obey his voice according to all that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul, that then Yahweh your God will release you from captivity, have compassion on you, and will return and gather you from all the peoples where Yahweh your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of the heavens, from there Yahweh your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. Yahweh your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you will possess it. He will do you good, and increase your numbers more than your fathers. **Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your offspring, to love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.***^{cldiii}

Circumcision is a reference to the covenant expression between Yahweh and Abraham and his descendants,^{cldiv} which is an expression of the original covenant of Genesis 1:26-27,^{cldv} so God circumcising the hearts of the Israelites means that He will lead the wayward Israelites to repentance unto belief in the covenant truth and its implications. Believing again in that covenant truth, the Israelites will know God to be the substance of their true identity and thus will again love Him. They will also “live” by believing the covenant truth in the sense that they will believe themselves to be permanently perfectly righteous in their true identity. Remember that life is a symbol of honor, and here it refers to perfect honor in the judgment of God.^{cldvi}

The Ten Commandments

As Christians, we often place special emphasis on ten specific ordinances in the Law of God, and they are aptly referred to as “The Ten Commandments,” which are found in Exodus 20:3-17 and Deuteronomy 5:7-21. Both passages are presented in the context of the scenario in which the commands were delivered to the Israelites. They are described as being literally, audibly spoken by God directly to the gathered congregation of Israelites, but surprisingly, God does not preface these ten commandments with any special emphasis or explanation. Thus, the natural question to ask is what makes these ten commandments so special that they are given unique emphasis in the Old Testament and in Christianity? One answer would be that they are the ten commandments that are written on the stone tablets of the covenant, but that answer still does not explain the unique significance of these commandments in contrast to the rest of the Law of God. In other words, these ten commandments were written on the stone tablets, but why were these ten commandments chosen for that distinction?

The only unique characteristics of The Ten Commandments, in contrast to the rest of the Law of God, are simply that they are the **first** ten commandments of the Law, during the time of Moses, and that God speaks them directly to the Israelites. After hearing them, the Israelites are stricken with fear and plead with Moses to instead be their intermediary with God. They want Moses to privately receive the commandments directly from God and then relay them to the congregation. Moses describes the scene in Deuteronomy 5:23-27:

When you heard the voice out of the middle of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, even all the heads of your tribes, and your elders; and you said, “Behold, Yahweh our God has shown us his glory and his greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the middle of the fire. We have seen today that God does speak with man, and he lives. Now therefore, why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear Yahweh our God’s voice any more, then we shall die. For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the middle of the fire, as we have, and lived? Go near, and hear all that Yahweh our God shall say, and tell us all that Yahweh our God tells you; and we will hear it, and do it.”

The Israelites know that Moses can hear God’s commands in God’s own voice and live, but they hear God’s voice and believe that they will die. The death that they refer to is metaphorically the feeling of being dishonorable in God’s judgment and literally their execution as part of God’s wrath. In other words, when the Israelites hear God’s commands in God’s own voice, they think only of how they have transgressed those commands in the past, and in that perception, they believe that God judges them to be dishonorable and thus rejects them. When they hear God’s

voice issuing commands, they interpret the commands to be a judgment of guilt upon them, from God, for transgressing those commands, and they assume that God will kill them accordingly.

Moses, on the other hand, has faith in God strong enough to understand that these commands from God are God honoring the Israelites because of their permanent true identity in Him. Moses understands that God commands honorable behavior because the Israelites are permanently perfectly honorable in His judgment in their true identity in Him. This is why Moses does not feel condemned upon hearing these commands directly from God, or as the passage puts it “*God does speak with man* [i.e. the man Moses], *and he lives.*” Remember that life is a symbol of honor.^{cclvii} Moses hears the commands of God and “*lives*” in the sense that he interprets the commands to be an honor to him and the other Israelites because the commands are an expression of their permanent perfect righteousness as permanent members of God’s collective despite any instances in which they transgress His commands.

It is only the rest of the Israelites’ weakness of faith in God – that is, weakness of belief in their permanent true identity in God and the righteousness of it – that causes them to be afraid of God speaking commands directly to them. Their state of deception about their true identity is what prevents them from feeling honored by the Law of God and honorable in God’s judgment and presence. Indeed, the fact that God speaks directly to the Israelites in His own voice is meant to be a huge honor to them. God speaking directly to them implies that He is directly present with them and feels a deep intimacy between Himself and them. This kind of direct association and intimacy between God and man is a characteristic of Moses that is lauded in the Bible. In Exodus 33:11, it is written, “*Yahweh spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.*”^{cclviii} As I will describe in the section titled “Friends of God,” a man considers his friends to be his equals in honor. Therefore, God speaking directly to the Israelites is meant to be interpreted by them as an expression of His belief that despite their sins, they share His collective identity in their true identity and thus that their true identity is just as honorable in His judgment as Himself.

This is also the reason why The Ten Commandments are written on the stone Tablets of the Covenant. The Ten Commandments are inscribed upon the stone tablets not so much so that the Israelites will remember those particular commandments, although they certainly should remember and heed them, but more so that they will remember God’s judgment that they are permanently perfectly honorable in their true identity. The stone tablets are meant to be a permanent reminder that God spoke directly to His people and, by extension, that God must consider His people to be His equals in honor. Indeed, the stone tablets are Tablets of the Covenant precisely because the covenant truth is the reason why we have honor equal to that of God in our true identity. Since the original covenant is between God and all humanity, rather than just between God and the Israelites,^{ccliix} we can also say that the stone tablets are meant to be a permanent reminder that all

humanity has the true identity that is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and thus is permanently perfectly righteous.

Proselytization

While the Law of God was communicated by God to the Israelites, mostly through Moses, it is not meant to apply only to the native-born Israelites, for God considers all humanity to be permanently part of His collective since all humanity has the permanent true identity that is His perfect image and likeness. Accordingly, even though it is not always obvious to the student of the Bible, the Law of God is very much proselytical in nature.

There are many places in the written Law that extend provisions and commands to the foreigners who dwell with the Israelites. One very notable example is Leviticus 19:33-34, which states “*If a stranger lives as a foreigner with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who lives as a foreigner with you shall be to you as the native-born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you lived as foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am Yahweh your God.*”

Significantly, the commands of the Law of God frequently refer to one’s “neighbor,” which is a reference to the Bedouin concept of a “tent-neighbour” or “Qasír.”^{cclx,cclxi} Bedouins are nomadic Near Easterners, and a tent-neighbor is somebody who pitches his tent close to the tent of the man whose protection he desires. This relationship is available to all who seek it, for “it is practically never refused.”^{cclxii} A stranger or foreigner dwelling among the Israelites would have done so most likely as a tent-neighbor. The open availability and applicability of this relationship is very important context for understanding that the Law of God expresses the covenant truth that **all people** are the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity.

Indeed, the above quote from Leviticus makes that shared true identity clear: “*you shall love him as yourself; for you lived as foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am Yahweh your God.*”^{cclxiii} In other words, being in the weak position of being a foreigner does not change a person’s true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God nor the righteousness of it. It did not effect such change in the Israelites when they were foreigners in Egypt, nor does it effect such change in the Gentile foreigners who dwell among the Israelites. Yahweh is the God of the foreigner just as much as of the native-born Israelite. Remember that the name “Yahweh” means that God is the substance of our true identity.^{cclxiv} Therefore, the passage from Leviticus makes it clear that the foreigner – i.e. the Gentile – is just as much the perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity as is the native-born Israelite. The apostle Paul preaches the same concept when he writes of the Gentiles being adopted as children of God through Christian faith.^{cclxv} His point is not that they were previously different from the Jews in God’s judgment but, rather, that through Christian faith, they know themselves to be no different from the Jews in the judgment of God. They know themselves

to be just as much the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity – i.e. full children of God – as are the Jews.

Returning to the concept of tent-neighbors, the protector treats the tent-neighbor as well as, if not better than, he treats his own kin, and vice-versa. The two men are typically from different tribes, but they treat each other as though they are part of the same collective and share the same collective identity. They honor each other in that treatment. It makes perfect sense that the Law of God so often incorporates a reference to the tent-neighbor relationship because the mechanism and strategy of the Law of God is that all people should validate each other as having the same honorable true identity in God. In practicing the Law of God, we are meant to express, maintain, and amplify our belief in that shared true identity in all people and God. Indeed, the Law of God states in Leviticus 19:18, “*you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” As Jesus demonstrates in the Parable of the Good Samaritan,^{cclxvi} your neighbor is he whom you choose to treat as your neighbor. Put another way, your neighbor is he whom you choose to recognize as having the same true identity in God as you possess. If you have faith in God’s covenant truth of Genesis 1:26-27, then that recognition should extend to all people.

The proselytism in the Law of God is also seen in Exodus 12:48-49:

When a stranger lives as a foreigner with you, and would like to keep the Passover to Yahweh, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it. He shall be as one who is born in the land; but no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. One law shall be to him who is born at home, and to the stranger who lives as a foreigner among you.”

Moses thus makes it clear that any foreigner is welcome to join the Israelites through faith in the covenant truth, which is faith in Yahweh,^{cclxvii} as signified by the males of the foreigner’s family being circumcised. Keep in mind, though, that not having such faith does not make a foreigner ineligible for tent-neighborship with an Israelite but only for participation in Yahwistic ritual. The reason for this distinction is that tent-neighborship expresses the Israelite’s recognition that the foreigner has the same true identity in God as himself whereas participation in Yahwistic rituals, like Passover, are meant to indicate the participant’s belief that he has that true identity. The justification for this treatment of foreigners is God’s recognition that all humanity is His perfect image and likeness in our permanent true identity and His desire that we believe in that true identity and its implications.

As a further example, consider Deuteronomy 15:1-3:

At the end of every seven years, you shall cancel debts. This is the way it shall be done: every creditor shall release that which he has lent to his neighbor. He shall not require payment from his neighbor and his brother, because Yahweh's release has been proclaimed. Of a foreigner you may require it; but whatever of yours is with your brother, your hand shall release.

Notice the equation made in that passage between one's "brother" and one's "neighbor." They are to be treated equally. Furthermore, the passage also implies that once a foreigner becomes your neighbor, you should no longer consider him a foreigner, for the passage first equates the neighbor with the brother and only then distinguishes treatment of the foreigner from the treatment of the brother. Thus, the foreigner who is treated differently from the brother must be the foreigner who is not your neighbor. More specifically, this is the foreigner who does not believe the covenant truth and thus does not consider himself to be part of God's people nor seek to join them.

The point here is not to create a stratification between people but, rather, to demonstrate that the only thing that can keep you from the honor of being one of God's people is simply your refusal to take your rightful place among God's people – that is, your refusal to believe that you are already and permanently the perfect image and likeness of God in your true identity. In other words, all people are God's people, but only those people who have faith in the covenant truth believe themselves to be so. Indeed, the foreigner who does not consider himself to be part of God's people is to be treated differently only because his perspective of himself will cause him to behave dishonorably, to some degree, toward those who do consider themselves to be part of God's people. In other words, in the context of this passage about debt forgiveness, if the foreigner considers himself to be different from the Israelites – i.e. not part of their collective in God – then he will not be equally generous in the forgiveness of their debts to him.

The proselytical nature of the Law of God makes perfect sense because it is all humanity, not only the native-born Israelites, who have the permanent true identity that is the perfect image and likeness of God. Yes, God chose the Israelites as His people but not to the exclusion of other people. The Israelites and their ancestors are simply the first lineage of people to have exclusive faith in Yahweh, but they are not meant to be the only lineage to do so. All human beings, by virtue of our permanent true identity in God, are God's chosen people, and we simply need to believe that concept to be true. The Israelites are meant to be an example and a beacon to all humanity of the wonderful covenant truth that applies to us all and the faith that we should all have in it. Certainly, Jesus built upon and fulfilled this intended role for the Israelites. As the Prophet Isaiah depicts God as saying to the Messiah, "*I will keep you, and make you a covenant for the people, as a light for the nations.*"^{cclvii}

Nevertheless, the proselytization effort should not come at the expense of damaging the native-born Israelites' faith in God, as described in Deuteronomy 7:1-6:

When Yahweh your God brings you into the land where you go to possess it, and casts out many nations before you—the Hittite, the Girgashite, the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite—seven nations greater and mightier than you; and when Yahweh your God delivers them up before you, and you strike them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them, nor show mercy to them. You shall not make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to his son, nor shall you take his daughter for your son. For that would turn away your sons from following me, that they may serve other gods. So Yahweh's anger would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But you shall deal with them like this: you shall break down their altars, dash their pillars in pieces, cut down their Asherah poles, and burn their engraved images with fire. For you are a holy people to Yahweh your God. Yahweh your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, above all peoples who are on the face of the earth.

Given that the Law of God commands the Israelites to love their neighbors as themselves, we are tempted to deem this passage to be a logical discontinuity. However, we must understand that it would be perfectly righteous for the Israelites to make peace with the Gentile nations if those nations were willing to join the Israelites by having faith exclusively in Yahweh. The reason that Moses commands against such peace here is because he is confident that the Gentile nations will not be willing to do that. Therefore, Moses believes that if the Israelites still make peace with them, then they will lead the Israelites astray from Yahweh and toward faith in and worship of false, pagan gods. Remember that the Gentiles are large in population, so the pagan practices would be prevalent in the Israelites' land and thus would be a constant temptation to the Israelites to worship false, pagan gods.

The Fear of God

One aspect of Christian doctrine that is often misunderstood is the fear of God. Some Christians think that fearing God means being afraid to transgress His commands because you believe that He will harm you if you do. We can immediately discard that definition by referring back to the story of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, as described in the section titled "The Ten Commandments." Remember, the Israelites plead with Moses to be their intermediary with God because they are terribly afraid that they will die – metaphorically and physically – from receiving God's commands directly from Him. Moses discerns that God agrees to the arrangement of him being the intermediary, but if God's desire is that people should be afraid of Him, why did He agree? If God

wanted the Israelites to be afraid of Him, He could have simply continued speaking to them directly in His own voice, so the fact that God ceased doing so proves that He does not want us to be afraid of Him.

Other Christians would say that the “fear of God” refers to having reverence for God, which is correct, but the word “reverence” is so infrequently used in modern discourse that it really does not help us much in understanding the meaning of fearing God. The best description of the fear of God is “admiration” of God. Admiration implies not just praise and respect but also a desire to emulate the object of your admiration. You not only think that the object of your admiration has good qualities but also that those qualities are right and good **for you** as well. You believe that you and the object of your admiration share a collective identity, and you desire to display the characteristics of that collective identity as well as the object of your admiration displays them. The fear of God is simply your admiration of God resulting from your belief that He is the substance of your true identity and the ideal model of the collective to which you belong.

The “fear” that is in “admiration” is only the fear of disappointing the one whom you admire. You deeply love that person, you want to emulate him, and you want him to validate your likeness to him. Namely, you want the one whom you admire to notice, praise, and reward you for your behavior that accords with his collective identity. Put another way, you judge the object of your admiration to be very honorable, and you want him to judge you to be equally honorable. Thus, your most intense fear is disappointing the person whom you admire because if you do, then your honor in that person’s judgment will be diminished, and he will cease to praise and reward you. That outcome will greatly tempt you to conclude that you are not like that person.

Of course, God never ceases to consider us to be His perfect image and likeness in our true identity, but we can displease God with our behavior that is contrary to our true identity in Him. We strive to live in accordance with God’s commands so that God will reciprocate by blessing us with pleasant corrective action.^{cclxix} Those blessings are sensory validation to us that our true identity is God’s perfect image and likeness and that we are perfectly righteous in our true identity as a result. In other words, those blessings are validations to us from God that we are part of His collective. We do not want to lose that sensory validation from God by transgressing His commands and causing Him to send us unpleasant corrective action. Significantly, though, unpleasant corrective action is still validation of our true identity in God because it is meant to lead us to repentance unto belief in the covenant truth, but the unpleasant nature of the corrective action often makes it difficult for us to perceive it to be such validation. In summary, we “fear” God by obeying His commands not for the purpose of **making** ourselves the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity but, rather, for the purpose of expressing, maintaining, and amplifying our preexisting belief that we already and permanently have that true identity.

The Father – Son Relationship

The Bible often refers to God as the Father of human beings, and the Near Eastern model of the father-son relationship aligns with the concept of admiration, as described in the previous section. For the son, his father is the ideal model of the collective to which they both belong. Accordingly, the son, as the junior in the relationship, looks to the example and guidance of the father, as the senior in the relationship, for an understanding of the nature of the collective identity that they share and how best to behave in accordance with it.

The son has deep admiration – also known as “reverence” or “fear” – for his father because his father is the exemplar of their collective. The son obeys the commands of his father because he knows his father to be that exemplar and because he wants his father to validate him as being part of their collective. The son wants the father to be pleased with him and to demonstrate that pleasure in various ways. In other words, the son judges his father to be very honorable, and he wants his father to judge him to be his equal in honor.

When the father sees that his son obeys his commands and behaves honorably, he feels personally satisfied because not only does his son honor him through obedience, but his son also honors and brings public honor to their collective by behaving honorably. As a result of this satisfaction, the father uses his resources to bring to his son the public honor that is befitting of a good steward of their collective. Practically speaking, the father does things such as ensure that his son has a good inheritance waiting for him, send his son to school so that he can obtain better employment, and select an excellent woman to be his son’s wife. The son perceives these benefits to be expressions of his father’s satisfaction with him and his father’s validation of him as being part of their collective and at least closer to his equal in honor.

This father-son relationship is alluded to in Deuteronomy 28:1-4.

It shall happen, if you shall listen diligently to Yahweh your God’s voice, to observe to do all his commandments which I command you today, that Yahweh your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings will come upon you, and overtake you, if you listen to Yahweh your God’s voice. You shall be blessed in the city, and you shall be blessed in the field. You shall be blessed in the fruit of your body, the fruit of your ground, the fruit of your animals, the increase of your livestock, and the young of your flock.

Namely, Yahweh will send the Israelites positive corrective action when they behave themselves in the way that He commands, which is behavior that is befitting of their membership in God’s

collective. Such behavior not only honors God directly through obedience but also honors and brings public honor to the collective of God. When the Israelites demonstrate themselves to be good stewards of God's collective, He will bless them with the benefits (and thus the public honor that those benefits yield) that befit such good stewards of that collective. The Israelites will interpret these blessings to be expressions of God's satisfaction with them, His validation that they are part of His collective as His perfect image and likeness in their true identity, and His judgment that they are perfectly honorable in their true identity.

It is instructive to examine the opposite scenario as well. If a son consistently disobeys his father's commands, then his father uses his resources to restrain his son's disobedience, hide it from public knowledge, and hopefully lead his son to correct his spirit and ways. The son is still part of the father's collective, but he is a bad steward of that collective. Practically speaking, the father will refrain from prospering his son, such as by not using his influence to get his son a good job. After all, if the son is lazy and careless, then placing him in a good job will only make his laziness and carelessness more noticeable to the public. Thus, placing him in a good job will only empower him to be an even worse steward of their collective by bringing even greater public dishonor to it.

Significantly, this opposite scenario is alluded to in Deuteronomy 28:15-19:

But it shall come to pass, if you will not listen to Yahweh your God's voice, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come on you and overtake you. You will be cursed in the city, and you will be cursed in the field. Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed. The fruit of your body, the fruit of your ground, the increase of your livestock, and the young of your flock will be cursed. You will be cursed when you come in, and you will be cursed when you go out.

When the Israelites disobey God, He will send them unpleasant corrective action to lead them away from that sin and back to a righteous spirit and mode of behavior. The passage describes this corrective action with the term "curses," which sounds very ominous to the modern Western mind, but it really just refers to hardships in life. In other words, when the Israelites are bad stewards of the collective of God, God will curtail their material resources, and thus their public honor, to prevent them from further disgracing the collective and also to lead them to repentance. After all, the Israelites' true identity as God's perfect image and likeness has not changed because of their sin. The rehabilitative purpose of unpleasant corrective action from God is expressed in Deuteronomy 30:1-3 and 8-10:

¹ *It shall happen, when all these things have come on you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you shall call them to mind among all the*

nations where Yahweh your God has driven you,² and return to Yahweh your God and obey his voice according to all that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul,³ that then Yahweh your God will release you from captivity, have compassion on you, and will return and gather you from all the peoples where Yahweh your God has scattered you. [...]

⁸You shall return and obey Yahweh's voice, and do all his commandments which I command you today. ⁹Yahweh your God will make you prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your ground, for good; for Yahweh will again rejoice over you for good, as he rejoiced over your fathers, ¹⁰if you will obey Yahweh your God's voice, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, if you turn to Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Friends of God

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Most often in the Bible, the relationship between Yahweh and humanity is likened to the father – son relationship, but the Bible also refers to our relationship with God with the analogy of friendship. Most specifically, this analogy is used in reference to the relationship between Moses and God. Exodus 33:11 states, “*Yahweh spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.*” However, recall from the section titled “The Ten Commandments” that God also initially spoke His commands directly to all of the Israelites, so the friendship model is supposed to apply to the relationship between God and all the Israelites. Since the Law of God applies to all people and since the Israelites are meant to be an example of the relationship with God that is right for all people, the friendship model is also supposed to apply to the relationship between God and all humanity. Of course, I am speaking of the friendship model as it refers to the closest of friends rather than to mere acquaintances.

In describing the intended relationship between God and humanity, the analogy of friendship provides the needed supplement to the analogy of father and son. In Near Eastern culture, friendship compares with parenthood in that both relationships imply a shared true identity between the two parties: friend-friend and father-son. However, the relationships also differ greatly in the participants’ assessments of each other. Namely, a Near Eastern man often considers himself to be more honorable than his son in the sense that his son does not yet, but will one day, match his understanding of and belief in the collective identity that they share and his manifestation of it in behavior. The son recognizes that distinction as well. However, a man considers his friends to be his current equals in honor. This difference in the two types of relationship exists because a man chooses as friends those people who match his current

conception of his true identity and his expression of it in his empirical identity. Contrariwise, a man's father is he who is responsible for correctly molding the man's conception of his true identity and his expression of it in his empirical identity.

As a result of the spiritual differences between the two types of relationship, the social experience of them differs as well. Specifically, there is no, or at least less, emotional distance maintained between friends compared to that between father and son. Whereas a son always shows behavioral deference to his father, friends show equal deference to each other. Furthermore, a Near Eastern man is much more likely to confide his concerns, hardships, etc. to his friend than he would to his son or his own father because there is a desire to maintain the elements of admiration and satisfaction in the parental relationship. Namely, a man never wants to express any weakness to his son, lest he lose honor in his son's judgment, and a son never wants to express any weakness to his father, lest he lose honor in his father's judgment. Contrariwise, friendship is a relationship of enduring mutually-perceived equality of honor in which the friends trust that those perceptions will be maintained. Therefore, a man believes that he can express weakness to his friend without losing honor in the judgment of his friend. However, a Near Eastern man will always side with his son over his friend if the two should ever come into conflict, and a son will always side with his father over his friend in a conflict situation as well. In Near Eastern culture, loyalty to kin is the priority in such situations.

With this context in mind, we can discern the nature of our intended relationship with God, for it is a combination of parenthood and intimate friendship. Indeed, praise God for that combination because it provides us with the best of both relationships. The connotation of the father-son relationship is guidance and loyalty whereas the connotation of the friendship relationship is equality of honor. In our relationship with God, we are to look to Him for guidance on how to think, speak, and act, trust in His loyalty to us, and be confident that despite our sins, we have permanent perfect honor in His judgment in our true identity because our true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness.

Why was the Law Needed?

At a summary level, the Law of God was, and is still, needed because of the existence of sin in the world, for the Law is meant to lead humanity away from sin. However, this answer sidesteps the problem of timing. The Law of God is not given formal expression until the time of Moses. The existence of sin in the world, though, significantly predates the time of Moses, for sin entered the world in the time of Adam and Eve. If the Law of God is a tool of leading us away from sin, then

why was it not delivered immediately following the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden?

From one point of view, the Law of God does originate long before Moses because, as I described previously, the written Law of God effectively formally codifies the customs, traditions, psychology, and philosophy of the ancestors of the Exodus-era Israelites. The real question, then, is why was the Law of God not formally expressed as being the Law of God until the time of Moses?

To answer that question, we must review a bit of Israelite history. A common term in this history is “the Patriarchs,” which refers to three prominent characters in the Book of Genesis: Abraham, his son Isaac, and Isaac’s son Jacob. Jacob became the father of twelve sons, who are the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. This whole group of people is composed of seminomadic Near Easterners who roam within Canaan, which is the land that God promised to them and their descendants. Circumstances then force Jacob and his descendants to dwell in Egypt for 430 years.^{cclxxi} During that sojourn, Moses is born and comes of age in Egypt, and he feels called by God to lead the Israelites out of oppressive conditions in Egypt and into the land of Canaan.

Moses discerns that the Israelites have become corrupted in spirit during their time in Egypt. Namely, the Israelites are greatly tempted to disbelieve that they are God’s people – i.e. the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity. Why do they struggle with this temptation? First, Joshua 24:14 indicates that the Israelites worship false, pagan gods during their time in Egypt, so they obviously do not believe that Yahweh is the sole substance of their true identity. Second, the Israelites’ living conditions in Egypt are overly burdensome, for they are required by the Egyptians to perform labor that they dislike. The Egyptians treat them like second-class citizens.^{cclxxii} Therefore, the Israelites are tempted to conclude that their suffering means that God has forsaken them, and their worship of false, pagan gods expresses, maintains, and amplifies that belief. Nevertheless, the Israelites stay in Egypt for as long as they do, despite the problems, because there are certain pleasures associated with such residence, namely a variety of tasty foods and an abundance of water. To the modern Western audience, which lives in a time and place of plentiful food and water, those pleasures seem minor, but many Near Easterners, even today, live with access to only limited and intermittent supplies of food and water.

Moses wants to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land of Canaan. Motivating the Israelites to desire to leave Egypt is relatively easy because they are already resentful of the labor that they have to perform in Egypt, and the land of Canaan promises the same, or better, material pleasures as found in Egypt. However, motivating the Israelites to actually leave and then complete the journey to Canaan, including any battles they will have to fight to conquer it, is the

greater difficulty because the exit will be contentious, and the journey will be long and difficult, lacking the amenities of daily life in Egypt. Accordingly, Moses must convince the Israelites that they are still Yahweh's people and that Yahweh is still on their side. In other words, Moses has to convince the Israelites of their true identity in God. Indeed, this goal is the exact purpose of the Law of God: a tool to express, maintain, and amplify our faith in the covenant truth and its implications. The Law of God is formally expressed at this time – that is, the time of the Israelites' journey to Canaan – precisely because the Israelites need to be reminded of and validated in their true identity in God. That reminder and validation will be effectuated by them hearing the Law of God and behaving in accordance with it while they are journeying to Canaan and when they settle there.

Indeed, the Law of God is codified in writing^{cclxxiii} so that it will be a permanent reminder and validation to the Israelites of their true identity in God and the implications of it. After all, if the Israelites are to be successful in leaving Egypt, journeying to Canaan, conquering Canaan, and possessing Canaan, then they will have to have strong faith in Yahweh's favor for them, and believing in their permanent true identity in God is the means of believing in His favor for them. Furthermore, treating each other honorably, as members of the same collective in God, will not only help the Israelites to believe in their true identity in God and God's favor for them but will also foster unity among the Israelites. When people treat each other honorably as members of the same collective, they are willing to help and defend each other, but when people treat each other dishonorably as being different from each other, they develop strife among themselves. Internal strife in a group makes that group less able to defeat enemies and defend against future attacks. The Israelites need to be a strong, united people if they are to successfully make the journey to Canaan, conquer it from its inhabitants, and defend it against future invasion. Indeed, many generations after the Israelites conquer Canaan, they do stray from the Law of God, and that is precisely when they begin to be progressively attacked and defeated by external enemies, culminating in the Israelites' exile from Canaan.

Why was the Law not Enough?

The Law of God is an expression of humanity's preexisting, permanent, and perfect righteousness as the perfect image and likeness of God in our permanent true identity, but the Israelites began to develop the flawed perspective that the Law of God is a standard that we have to meet in order to gain righteousness. In other words, they do not believe that human beings have preexisting righteousness but, rather, that we must acquire righteousness through compliance with God's Law. In the time and culture in which Jesus lives, the popular and prominent religious scholars – i.e. the so called "scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees"^{cclxxiv} – are considered by most Israelites to be experts on God. They are considered by the majority of the Israelites to be the exemplars of righteousness –

i.e. the most honorable people in the judgment of God – because they best know, understand, and uphold their own teachings, which is to say that they scrupulously comply with the supposed Spirit of God and the Law of God. Additionally, when those popular religious scholars meet, their primary topics of discussion or debate are the fine points of compliance with the Law of God. To be clear, these religious scholars shape public opinion on any number of topics because the public believes that they know and express the Spirit of God, and no Israelite wants to think, speak, or act contrary to the Spirit of God.

Given this narrow focus upon legal compliance by the very people that the Israelites believe to be the most righteous among them, it is not hard to understand how the majority of the Israelites, particularly those with the least direct knowledge of the Scriptures, also come to the conclusion that complying with the Law of God is the means by which a man gains righteousness for his otherwise unrighteous state of being. Furthermore, it is easy to understand how those same Israelites come to consider anybody who does not match the behavioral punctiliousness of the scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees to be sinful – i.e. lacking righteousness.

Additionally, given the externally-determined nature of identity in Near Eastern culture, we can understand how an Israelite would be likely to gauge his righteousness by how he is treated by the people in society – i.e. the publicly-reputed people of God – particularly those who are considered to be the experts on God and the most honorable in His judgment. In other words, if other Israelites, especially the popular religious scholars, dishonor an Israelite because he does not strictly and fully conform to the commands of the Law of God, then that opinion and treatment will carry the psychological and philosophical force, in the mind of that Israelite and the other Israelites, of God Himself judging that Israelite to be dishonorable. Therefore, the Israelite will believe, or at least be extremely tempted to believe, that he is sinful. Likewise, the other Israelites, especially the popular religious scholars, honoring a man causes, or at least tempts, him to believe that he is righteous – i.e. honorable in the judgment of God. This is especially true for the popular religious scholars themselves, who are often honored by the Israelite community as a result of their public displays of piety.^{cclxxv}

This flawed reasoning is especially likely to occur given the Near Eastern belief in divine fatalism,^{cclxxvi} by which an Israelite deduces that both a man who is esteemed by popular opinion to be righteous and a man who is publicly disdained as being sinful are both in those respective conditions by the judgment and will of God. Therefore, Biblical Israelites equate, or at least are very tempted to equate, a man's honor or dishonor in the judgment of people, particularly in the judgment of the prominent religious scholars, with his honor or dishonor in the judgment of God. In other words, if the publicly-reputed people of God treat a man as being sinful – i.e. dishonorable in the judgment of God – by dishonoring him, then that man will be greatly tempted to consider himself to be sinful. The man will reason that because God judges him to be dishonorable, He

must have willed him into being dishonored by the public and must also be actively refusing to deliver him from that treatment.

Moreover, a key point to understand is that these public judgments about the righteousness or sinfulness of a person cause that person to believe, or at least greatly tempt him to believe, that he is righteous or sinful, respectively, not just in his behavior but also in his true identity. After all, if a man is dishonored by people whom he considers to be part of God's collective because of their compliance with God's Law, then he concludes, or is very tempted to conclude, that he is not part of that collective and, thus, that the collective's identity – i.e. the perfect image and likeness of God – is not his true identity. Therefore, he concludes, or is very tempted to conclude, that his true identity is dishonorable in the judgment of God – i.e. sinful.

How do we know that the popular religious scholars judge a person's righteousness and sinfulness solely upon his compliance with the Law of God? Luke 18:11-12 provides the clearest indication of that judgment: "*The Pharisee stood and prayed by himself like this: 'God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of men: extortionists, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get.'*" Granted, this passage is part of a parable that Jesus creates, but the portrayal of the Pharisee is reliable because Jesus is an astute observer of society. In the prayer, the Pharisee clearly implies his belief that both he and God judge people to be righteous or sinful solely based upon their compliance with the Law of God. After all, the Pharisee would not thank God for making him somebody who fully complies with the Law of God unless he believes that God judges people solely by such compliance. Additionally, the Pharisee expresses belief in the divine fatalism that God causes people to be legally-compliant or sinners, so the further implication is that God made the Pharisee obedient to the Law and the sinner disobedient because He favors the Pharisee and disdains the sinner. The Pharisee would not thank God for making him unlike other men unless he believes that he is better/more honorable than other men in the judgment of God.

How do we know that the popular religious scholars treat some people as being sinful by dishonoring them? First, it is important to understand that this treatment does not always take the form of direct ridicule. Indeed, it often takes the form of simple avoidance of interaction with those people who are considered to be sinful.^{cclxxvii} Nevertheless, the Gospels do contain some examples of direct attempts to humiliate and thus dishonor:

- **Mark 7:1-5:** In this passage, the Pharisees accuse the disciples of not following the traditions of the ancestors in that the disciples do not wash their hands before eating. The reference there is to Levitical cleanliness not microbial cleanliness.^{cclxxviii,cclxxix,cclxxx,cclxxxi} More than likely, the disciples do wash their hands,^{cclxxxii,cclxxxiii} just not with the procedure and thoroughness that the Pharisees deem to be required for removing Levitical

uncleanness. This circumstance may be due to a scarcity of water and/or the disciples' lack of complete knowledge about the procedure. The Scripture states that the Pharisees and all the other Jews wash their hands in the prescribed way before eating, but the meaning is likely that this is a practice of all the *sophisticated* Jews from Jerusalem, the city from which the Pharisees have come in this passage. Indeed, the Pharisees observe many traditions, the precise details of which many uneducated and/or provincial people are likely unaware.^{cclxxiv}

- **Matthew 12:1-2:** “*At that time, Jesus went on the Sabbath day through the grain fields. His disciples were hungry and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. But the Pharisees, when they saw it, said to him, “Behold, your disciples do what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.”*” No work is supposed to be performed on the Sabbath, but the poorest people in society, including Jesus and His disciples, often do not have the means to store sufficient quantities of food prior to the Sabbath.
- **Matthew 9:10-11:** “*As he sat in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”*” Similarly, in **Luke 15:2:** “*The Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, “This man [Jesus] welcomes sinners, and eats with them.”*” Not only do the Pharisees criticize Jesus and His disciples in these passages, but they also express a disdainful attitude toward the “*tax collectors and sinners,*” who likely can hear those words of contempt.
- **Luke 7:36-39:** “*One of the Pharisees invited [Jesus] to eat with him. He entered into the Pharisee’s house and sat at the table. Behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that he was reclining in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. Standing behind at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and she wiped them with the hair of her head, kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, ‘This man, if he were a prophet, would have perceived who and what kind of woman this is who touches him, that she is a sinner.’”*” Evidently, the Pharisee makes this statement loud enough to be heard or makes some gesture or facial expression that indicates this thought, for Jesus subsequently responds to him about it. This passage demonstrates the Pharisee’s contempt for the woman, whose sin is probably that she is sexually immoral in some way (adulterer, prostitute, etc.).

From these examples, we can discern that Jesus and His followers are people who are considered to be sinful by the prominent religious scholars of the day. Furthermore, much of the public esteems these scholars to be pillars of righteousness, so they agree with the scholars about Jesus and His followers. Therefore, Jesus and His followers have nothing to lose in terms of their public reputation. This is important to understand because while Jesus’ teachings are applicable to all humanity, they are typically phrased in a way that validates the righteousness of lowly people in

society. Jesus phrases His teachings that way because those people form the bulk of His immediate audience and because they have the most urgent need for such validation, given that they receive no validation of their righteousness from the scribes, rabbis, Pharisees, and much of the public.

Jesus understands that a man's permanent perfect righteousness is in his true identity, which is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. He knows that peace of mind about your righteousness comes only from believing that true identity to be yours. Jesus seeks to correct the people's misunderstanding of the Law as being a standard that they must meet in order to acquire righteousness. That mission pervades Jesus' entire ministry.

In Matthew chapter five, Jesus gives expression to how His audience, which is composed primarily of lowly, and thus also poor, people in society, is considered to be sinful by the popular religious scholars of the day and their followers because they do not fully comply with the cultural conventions of the day.^{cclxxxv} In Matthew 5:3, Jesus alludes to His audience with the phrase, "*the poor in spirit.*" "Poor in spirit" means lacking self-esteem and, more to the point in this context, believing oneself to be sinful – i.e. dishonorable in the judgment of God. Because they are considered to be sinful by the popular religious scholars and are treated accordingly, the people in Jesus' audience have, or are greatly tempted to have, a spirit – i.e. a perspective – of belief that they are sinful.

Jesus gives several examples of His audience's behavior and living circumstances that yield the public reputation for sinfulness that causes their poorness of spirit. For instance, in Matthew 5:33-37, Jesus speaks about swearing oaths. He is referring to the Near Eastern custom of inserting oaths into one's speech when making assertions of truth or promises.^{cclxxxvi,cclxxxvii} These oaths involve God directly or indirectly, and there is a very firm belief among Near Easterners that God does enforce these oaths. Accordingly, these oaths are honorable in the judgment of people because they imply that the speaker is so sure of the truth of his assertion or his ability to do whatever he has promised that he is willing to take an oath with such serious consequences for failure to fulfill it.

Contrariwise, if a man makes an assertion or a promise but does not insert such an oath, then people will judge him to be insincere, and thus, he will be dishonorable in their judgment. This situation is one in which Jesus' audience members often find themselves. They are poor and socially weak. They cannot afford to take such oaths because they may well find themselves in a position where they cannot guarantee the truthfulness of an assertion or fulfill a promise that they have made. The prestigious men in society can make assertions without fear that anyone will dare to dispute them. The rich and powerful men in society can fulfill any promise they make because

they have many resources to do so. The poor and lowly people – i.e. Jesus' audience in Matthew chapter 5 – do not have those advantages. Thus, the people in Jesus' audience often abstain from taking oaths altogether and endure the resulting dishonor in the judgment of people. In other words, they choose the lesser dishonor of not inserting oaths into their assertions and promises rather than the greater dishonor of breaking an oath by being proven wrong in an assertion or by failing to fulfill a promise.

Remember that in ancient Israelite culture, behavior that is publicly considered to be dishonorable is equated with sin, and dishonor in the judgment of people is equated with dishonor in the judgment of God – i.e. sinfulness. We can thus discern that the lowly people who refrain from taking oaths are judged by others to be sinful based upon that behavior. As their public reputation greatly influences their perception of themselves, we can also discern that the lowly people consider themselves, or at least are greatly tempted to consider themselves, to be sinful.

With each example of behavior that brings a public reputation for sinfulness to His audience, Jesus also provides an interpretation of the Law of God that actually shows these people to be practicing greater righteousness than even the scribes and Pharisees. In Matthew 5:33-37, Jesus references the command of the Law of God that you shall fulfill all your oaths and vows to God.^{cclxxxviii} Failure to do so dishonors God because it expresses your belief that God is unable to punish you and/or that it is not worthwhile to cultivate an ongoing positive relationship with Him. Jesus then elaborates, *“but I tell you, don’t swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is the throne of God; nor by the earth, for it is the footstool of his feet; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Neither shall you swear by your head, for you can’t make one hair white or black.”* In that list, Jesus alludes to the fact that Near Easterners take oaths by or in the name of many different things, and His point is that all of those things are holy to God – i.e. they possess holiness/righteousness.^{cclxxxix}

Therefore, when people swear an oath, they swear on (or “by”) things that are holy to God. These are things that are set apart for God, favored by God, and judged by God to be honorable. All people are holy to God because their true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness, and all other holy things of God’s creation are holy to God because they manifest in some way our true identity in God, the righteousness of it, and thus our holiness. Consequently, when you swear on any holy person or thing, you swear on the holiness/righteousness of that person or thing, and if you fail to fulfill your oath, then God must send punishment to you. If He did not do so, then He would create the impression that He is unable to uphold and defend that holiness/righteousness or that He falsely portrayed the person or thing as being holy/righteous. Accordingly, God severely punishes unfulfilled oaths and vows that are sworn on holy people and things, for the unfulfillment dishonors him. Indeed, this danger is what makes an oath a tool of convincing people of one’s words, for one takes a genuinely serious risk in making an oath.

A man often has no power to truly guarantee the fulfillment of any vow or oath. As Jesus points out, a man cannot even do something as insignificant as making “*one hair [on his head] white or black.*” Therefore, Jesus reasons that while the scribes and Pharisees fulfill their vows to God and their oaths to/by/on God, the people in His audience are better stewards of their behavioral righteousness by not swearing at all, whether vows or oaths. Put another way, it is impossible for the people in Jesus’ audience to fail to fulfill a vow to God or an oath to/by/on God since they do not swear at all whereas the scribes and Pharisees risk such failure because they do make such vows and oaths. Admittedly, there is some implicit exaggeration in Jesus’ reasoning, for the people in His audience surely do make some vows to God and swear some oaths to/by/on God. However, as previously described, they often refrain from doing so out of necessity. Thus, Jesus cleverly and wittily validates the superior righteousness of the behavior that the lowly people already practice out of necessity as compared to the behavior of the popular religious scholars in society, such as the scribes and Pharisees.

Of course, if given the chance, assuredly the Pharisees would dispute Jesus’ logic, but Jesus’ point in Matthew chapter five is not to make the practice of the Law of God the source of righteousness nor to rank people based upon their legal compliance. Rather, Jesus uses this clever reasoning simply to communicate to His audience that they are righteous despite having a public reputation for sinfulness. Jesus wants to “build them up” after they have been “torn down” for so long by popular opinion.

Ultimately, Jesus wants to strengthen His audience members’ resistance to the temptation to believe about themselves the sinfulness that other people believe about them. As Jesus puts it in Matthew 5:13-15: “*You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its flavor, with what will it be salted? It is then good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men. You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill can't be hidden. Neither do you light a lamp and put it under a measuring basket, but on a stand; and it shines to all who are in the house.*” “Salt of the earth” means best of the best^{cxc} and, thus, most honorable. A city on a hill has honor because it is in a strong defensive position. Light is a symbol of honor,^{cxcii} so “*light of the world*” signifies having the totality of the world’s honor in oneself or having the greatest honor out of all people in the world. With this figurative language, Jesus refers to honor in the judgment of God – i.e. righteousness.

Jesus is warning and encouraging His audience to not be deceived about their righteousness. In other words, they are not to lose their figurative “*flavor*” nor extinguish their figurative “*light*.” Certainly, Jesus employs hyperbole here because He does not consider His audience members to be literally more righteous than the rest of humanity. Rather, He is simply trying to validate them as being righteous despite how they are treated by other people. They should not forget that all

humanity, regardless of our behavior and living circumstances, has permanent perfect righteousness because all people are permanently God's perfect image and likeness in our true identity. Like salt that has lost its flavor or a lamp that has been extinguished, a man who disbelieves his righteousness is good for nothing, not because God deems him to be so but because the man deems himself to be so.

Greater Righteousness

The lowly people in Jesus' audience think, or are extremely tempted to think, that God wills them into dishonorable living circumstances and conditions necessitating transgressions of the Law of God, and the resulting dishonor in the judgment of people, because He judges them to be dishonorable. The truth, though, is that this is an example of unpleasant corrective action that is meant to be an opportunity for the recipient to cling all the more intensely to his faith in the covenant truth and its implications.^{cxcii} Jesus wants His audience to understand that God wills them into those circumstances and conditions because He knows that they are permanently perfectly honorable in their permanent true identity as His perfect image and likeness, and He wants them to have a greater perception of their permanent perfect righteousness than can be gained from public esteem.

The popular religious scholars of the day – i.e. the scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees – treat the lowly people as being sinful because of their failures to comply with the Law of God, as the scholars define it. Nevertheless, Jesus treats the lowly people as being righteous because He knows the permanent perfect righteousness in their permanent true identity as God's perfect image and likeness. Given the externally-determined nature of identity in Near Eastern culture, the only way that the lowly people will be able to believe in their righteousness is by having faith in Jesus. That is, they must have faith in both Jesus' judgment **that** they are permanently perfectly righteous in their true identity and **the reason why** He makes that judgment, namely their permanent true identity as God's perfect image and likeness.

Put another way, it is only through Christian faith in the covenant truth that the lowly people can know and believe their permanent perfect righteousness. Moreover, they must have faith in that covenant truth and the permanent perfect righteousness that it yields whilst their public reputation for sinfulness persists. Ultimately, the “greater righteousness” that Jesus speaks of in Matthew chapter 5 is to be treated as being sinful by other people while still confidently believing that you are permanently perfectly righteous in your true identity because your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God.

The popular religious scholars of the day establish their righteousness upon what other people think of them and, more specifically, upon how other people treat them. The scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees only believe themselves to be righteous when and because they are shown special esteem as an expression of people's belief that they are preeminently righteous. Accordingly, the popular religious scholars scrupulously obey the commands of the Law of God in public so that by doing so, they cultivate a public reputation for being extremely righteous. As Jesus describes them in Matthew 23:5, “*But they do all their works to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad*

and enlarge the fringes of their garments." The phylacteries and garments with fringes refer to items worn by a Jewish man when praying, so Jesus' meaning is that the scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees have versions of these garments that make it very noticeable to other people that they are praying. Seeing those scholars regularly behave righteously, such as by praying, causes the majority of the Jewish people to believe that they are very righteous, and they treat them with special esteem as a result. As Jesus says in Matthew 23:6-7, "[the scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees] *love the place of honor at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, the salutations in the marketplaces, and to be called 'Rabbi, Rabbi' by men.*" Those are exactly the kinds of public displays of high esteem that allow the popular religious scholars to believe that they are righteous.

Furthermore, in order to preserve that special treatment from the public, the religious scholars not only have to behave in scrupulous compliance with the Law of God, but they also have to ensure that the majority of the Jewish people cannot themselves meet that same standard of legal compliance. This is why the prominent religious scholars of the time issue expositions, interpretations, and applications of the Law of God that are too burdensome for many people to bear and then treat as being sinful the people who fail to fully comply with those standards. As Jesus says about the prominent religious scholars in Matthew 23:4, "*For they bind heavy burdens that are grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not lift a finger to help them.*" The popular religious scholars of the day want the majority of people to fall short of perfect legal compliance because then their own scrupulous legal compliance will make them exceedingly righteous in the perspective of the masses, and as a result, the masses will treat them with overt displays of high esteem. Jesus' point is that everything the scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees do is for the purpose of maintaining their public reputation for extreme righteousness because the sensory manifestations of public esteem, which result from that reputation, are the foundation of their self-perspective that they are righteous.

Incidentally, you may discern logical inconsistencies in the popular religious scholars' thinking. Namely, how can they feel validated as being righteous by people, many of whom they consider to be less righteous than themselves? By extension, how can their perception of their true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God be affected, positively or negatively, by people whom they do not believe have that true identity themselves? They must simultaneously or alternately believe the masses to be righteous and sinful, the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity and unlike God in their true identity. Such thoughts are contradictory and thus illogical, but remember that the reasoning which motivates sin is illogical.^{cxciii} Behaving in accordance with the Law of God is a sin if you do so with the belief that such compliance gains you righteousness and gains you a public reputation for righteousness upon which you will base your perception of your righteousness. The popular religious scholars sin in this way, so we should expect their reasoning and behavior to be illogical.

The problem with basing your self-perception of righteousness upon your public reputation for righteousness is that your behavior and living circumstances will not be consistently perfectly compliant with the Law of God. One sinful act can ruin your reputation for righteousness.^{ccxciv} Furthermore, people are fickle in their opinions. Just because they judge you to be righteous today does not mean that they will judge you to be righteous tomorrow, even if your behavior has not changed. Even if they do judge you to be righteous, their display of special esteem for you may be less than ideal for any number of reasons. Under the popular religious scholars' model of righteousness, if they lose their public reputation for righteousness and/or they are not shown special esteem, then they lose their self-perspective that they are righteous. Contrariwise, Jesus commands His audience to have a self-perspective of their righteousness that is founded upon a faith in that which cannot change: our true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God.

Because the people in Jesus' audience are judged to be sinful by the popular religious scholars and their followers, they have no temptation to seek their righteousness in their public reputation. That is why Jesus speaks in Matthew 5:1-12 about the lifestyle of the lowly people being a blessing. These are the so-called "Beatitudes" – statements beginning with "*blessed are...*" In other words, you are blessed by God when you have no distractions from a perspective of your righteousness that is purely based upon faith in God's covenant truth. For example, in Matthew 5:9, Jesus says "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.*" The lowly people in Jesus' audience cannot afford to have feuds with people because they do not have the physical, financial, social, or legal strength to defend themselves. Thus, they endure and forgive insults in the interest of keeping peaceful relations with people. However, such behavior has a connotation of weakness because the peacemaker has not defended his honor against the insult. As a result, society considers the man who consistently makes peace by forgiving insults to be dishonorable and, thus, sinful. Jesus nevertheless counts the peacemaker blessed because given his public reputation for sinfulness, the peacemaker has no reason or motivation to seek his righteousness in his public reputation. Such a man can only believe himself to be righteous by believing that his true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. As Jesus says, the peacemakers "*shall be called children of God,*" or put another way, the peacemakers will know themselves to be the permanent perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity, and permanently perfectly righteous in their true identity as a result, because they are not distracted from that knowledge by seeking their righteousness in public esteem. In other words, they will be confident that God calls them His children despite what other people call them.

Finally, one point that needs to be emphasized here is that despite the fact that greater righteousness comes from Christian faith in the covenant truth, there is nothing objectively wrong with treating people with esteem because you believe that they are righteous in their true identity. It is also not wrong to enjoy receiving such treatment. Indeed, such reciprocal displays of honor are the mechanism and strategy of the Law of God. We are meant to treat each other honorably as a means of expressing, maintaining, and amplifying our belief in our true identity in God and the

righteousness of it. However, seeking and giving such esteem is only appropriate if everybody involved understands that what makes a man permanently perfectly righteous is not his living circumstances, behavior, or public reputation but rather only the fact that his true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God.

Holiness

The definition of the Hebrew word that is translated as “holy” is “set apart,”^{cxcv,cxcvi,cxcvii} and the word is typically used with the meaning of being holy to Yahweh – that is, set apart for Yahweh. You are permanently perfectly holy to God in your true identity because your true identity is permanently God’s perfect image and likeness. You are holy to God in your spirit when you perceive yourself to have that true identity, and that perspective is manifested in your behavior. That perspective is the default spirit of a man, but it can be corrupted. That corruption of spirit is expressed in the words and deeds that compromise spiritual holiness. Of course, this description of holiness is very similar to the definition of righteousness, and indeed, holiness and righteousness are synonyms.

Additionally, certain objects are holy to God because He intends them to express or reflect the collective and collective identity that are shared by humanity and Himself. Those objects are holy to humanity when we perceive them to have that symbolism, and they become unholy to us when we no longer perceive them to have that symbolism. Accordingly, we consider our churches, altars, Bibles, sacramentals, etc. to be holy to both God and us because they symbolize, in one way or another, the covenant truth.

In some passages of the Bible, God is described as being Holy.^{cxcviii} Of course, God is permanently perfectly holy to Himself because He is set apart for Himself in the sense of permanently perfectly being Himself. However, the more pertinent meaning of God’s holiness is His holiness to humanity, which is the fact that He is set apart for us in the sense that He is the sole and permanent foundation and substance of our permanent true identity. Therefore, we should always consider God to be holy to us. Mutual recognition of holiness and honor between God and humanity makes sense because we permanently share the same perfectly strong collective and collective identity. Indeed, consider Leviticus 19:1-2, which prefaces a list of some of the commands in God’s Law:

“Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and tell them, ‘You shall be holy; for I, Yahweh your God, am holy.’”

In other words, the Israelites are meant to behave in accordance with God's commands in order to express, maintain, and amplify their belief that their permanent true identity is God's perfect image and likeness. They should behave in a way (i.e. a holy way) that express, maintains, and amplifies their belief (i.e. their holiness of spirit) that their permanent true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God (i.e. that they are permanently perfectly holy to God and that God is permanently perfectly holy to them). God commands this behavior precisely because He believes in humanity's permanent true identity in Him, and He wants us to have the same belief. That is, God wants there to be mutual recognition of holiness and honor between Him and us.

Significantly, in the Near East, there is a folk belief that holiness refers to "a mysterious wonder-working force which is looked upon as a blessing from God."^{cxxix} It is understood to be a force that can be gained, lost, or enjoyed in an impersonal, mechanical, and transactional way. Certain people, objects, places, etc. are believed to possess holiness and to be able to transmit it to others and/or to cause others to benefit from its wonder-working power.^{ccc} Indeed, as I described previously,^{ccci} the popular religious scholars of Jesus' time – i.e. the scribes, rabbis, Pharisees, and priests – treat some people as being honorable/righteous and others as being dishonorable/sinful, and that treatment also has the implication of those people benefiting or not benefiting, respectively, from the supposed "force of holiness" of those scholars. This concept of holiness relates to the aforementioned definition of holiness in that God favors you and blesses you because your true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness, which is the genuine holiness of your true identity. Nevertheless, the concept of holiness as a force in itself, while popular among Near Easterners, is inaccurate, but because of its popularity, it is present in the Bible. We see an example of this misunderstanding and of Jesus' attempt to correct it in Mark 5:24-34:

[Jesus] went with him, and a great multitude followed him, and they pressed upon him on all sides. A certain woman who had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and had suffered many things by many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better, but rather grew worse, having heard the things concerning Jesus, came up behind him in the crowd and touched his clothes. For she said, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately the flow of her blood was dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction.

Immediately Jesus, perceiving in himself that the power had gone out from him, turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"

His disciples said to him, "You see the multitude pressing against you, and you say, 'Who touched me?'"

He looked around to see her who had done this thing. But the woman, fearing and trembling, knowing what had been done to her, came and fell down before him, and told him all the truth.

He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be cured of your disease.”

The woman believes Jesus to be a holy Man because she believes that His teachings accurately represent and communicate the Spirit of God, and she seeks to benefit from Jesus' holiness by touching His garment. That is, she believes that upon touching His garment, Jesus' holiness will heal her ailment. At first, it seems like she is correct, for upon touching His garment, she is healed of her ailment. Also, Jesus immediately recognizes that “*power*” has been transmitted from Him, so it seems like Jesus supports the concept of benefiting from the holiness of another person.

However, Jesus' subsequent behavior indicates that He does not support that concept. Namely, He insists upon finding the person who touched his garment even though it seems unlikely that the person can be identified given that a large crowd of people closely surrounds Him. He is insistent because He knows that the person touched Him based upon a misunderstanding of holiness, He knows that a miracle has been worked through Him (i.e. “*power had gone out from him*”), and He feels compelled to correct the misunderstanding about holiness, especially because the miracle can be erroneously used to maintain and amplify that misunderstanding. The woman is afraid because she believes that she has angered this obviously extremely holy Man by benefiting from His holiness without His permission.

Jesus tells her that her healing is the product of her faith in Him. In other words, she believes Jesus' teachings that the true identity of all humanity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. Jesus' point is that by believing His teachings, she effectively already believes in her own permanent perfect holiness to God in her true identity. He wants her to understand that God miraculously healed her ailment as a means of validating her belief in the covenant truth and thus of validating the preexisting, permanent, and perfect holiness to God that she already possesses. Not only is Jesus not angry with the woman, as she feared, but He is happy and encourages her to be happy as well because her healing is God's testimony to her faith and the accuracy of it.

This is a lesson for all Christians, for in our desperate need for God's help, we sometimes forget that we already have His favor permanently because of our permanent true identity in Him. Namely, people and objects that you regard as being holy to God, and any miracles that you believe proceed from your association with them, are only meant to be reminders of your own preexisting, permanent, and perfect holiness in your permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God. In other words, God helps you not because Jesus or anyone or anything else is holy to Him but, rather, ***because of your permanent perfect holiness to Him, which is your permanent true identity as His perfect image and likeness!***

Cleanness and Uncleanness

The Bible describes righteousness and sin, but it also describes conditions in which a person or object is “clean” or “unclean.” These conditions are described in the Law of God (primarily in the Old Testament books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), and sometimes we refer to these conditions with the terms “Levitical cleanness” and “Levitical uncleanness.” We are tempted to equate cleanness with righteousness and uncleanness with sin, but the concepts are not the same.

The most obvious difference between sin and uncleanness is that uncleanness is described as arising from activities that are not morally wrong. For example, causes of uncleanness include, but are not limited to, a man having sexual intercourse with his wife, a woman in her time of menstruation, and a woman who has recently given birth to a child.^{ccii} Clearly, these activities are not morally wrong because they are natural parts of our lives as human beings, as we are designed by God. Uncleanness is a state of being that is periodically unavoidable for every person because it arises from natural parts of our lives. Thus, we can discern that being unclean is not an expression of God’s judgment of the morality of our behavior. What, then, is the logic behind this code of “cleanness?”

Every activity that renders a person or object unclean has associated with it, at least in the mind of the ancient Near Easterner, some potential sin and/or calamity. For instance, sexual intercourse between a man and his wife, despite all of its moral rightness, nevertheless conjures thoughts of potential sin in the minds of the husband and wife. Remember that in ancient Near Eastern cities, villages, and nomadic camps, multiple people of one family often live in the same one or two-room dwellings, and the dwellings themselves tend to be close together. We can imagine, then, that an occasion of sexual intercourse between a husband and wife would be known to multiple people in the vicinity, even if just through sound alone. Additionally, in Near Eastern culture, the sexual morality of the women is of the highest priority in a family, and a woman’s act of sexual immorality brings extreme dishonor to everyone in her family.^{cciii}

Even though in our example, the woman has not committed an act of sexual immorality, the fact that other men have heard the married couple in the act creates the perception, in the minds of the husband and wife, of vulnerability to such sexual immorality. By having sexual intercourse within the hearing of other men, the couple have effectively broadcast the wife’s sexual potential. That sense of publicity yields, in the minds of the husband and wife, a perception of vulnerability to, fear of, and premature despair regarding the potential sin and calamity that the wife’s adultery would be, and that perception is a state of uncleanness. Of course, we modern people would argue

that this logic is ridiculous because the wife has committed no sexual immorality nor is there any reason to believe that she will in the future.

However, cleanness and uncleanness are not about what is reasonable nor are they objective characteristics of people or things. Rather, they are only perceptions that exist in the minds of people. Uncleanness is having a spirit of vulnerability, fear, and premature despair regarding some potential sin and/or calamity. Cleanness is the absence of that perception of vulnerability, fear, and premature despair. Practically speaking, a man is clean by default and only becomes unclean by practicing or being involved in some activity or condition that conveys uncleanness to him.

Uncleanness is a man's spirit of believing that he – that is, both his empirical identity and true identity – is unlike God and dishonorable in His judgment because he reckons in his mind that the potential sin and/or calamity is inevitable or is a foregone conclusion. In the case of anticipated sin, he believes that the sin will make him unlike God and dishonorable in His judgment. In the case of anticipated calamity, he believes that God causing or allowing it to occur will be an expression of God's judgment that he is unlike Him and dishonorable.^{ccxiv} Significantly, in the Near East, there is a popular belief that uncleanness is a defilement of holiness (in the sense of a wonder-working force) and so can have wide-ranging negative effects.^{ccxv} Uncleanness can also be understood as a defilement of a man's perception of his holiness to God because Levitical uncleanness negatively affects a man's belief in the definition and righteousness of his true identity. Recall also that holiness and righteousness are synonyms.^{ccxvi} A spirit of uncleanness differs from a spirit of sinfulness in that the latter includes resentment toward God for the supposed loss of one's true identity in Him and the righteousness of it^{ccxvii} whereas the former includes acceptance of and resignation to that supposed loss.

Even though the unclean man has not committed the sin nor suffered the calamity that he currently fears, his perception that he is sinful in his true identity and empirical identity is nevertheless a **current reality** in his mind. Indeed, another thing that separates a spirit of uncleanness from a spirit of sinfulness is that the former involves only foregone conclusions about potential sin and/or calamity whereas the latter involves actual sins. Of course, since a man's true identity is never dishonorable in God's judgment, a spirit of uncleanness is just as much a product of deception from evil about a man's true identity as is a spirit of sinfulness. Furthermore, since a spirit of uncleanness involves sins and calamities that have not actually occurred, it is also a deception from evil about a man's empirical identity.

As another example, leprosy is considered to be uncleanness^{ccviii} even though the ancient Israelite perception is that a man's sickness or disability is proof that God is punishing the man for some sin that he or his family member committed.^{ccix} Diseases are common in the relatively modern Near

East because of malnourishment, poor hygiene, and unsanitary living conditions.^{cccx,cccxii} Thus, diseases, including skin diseases, were surely common among the ancient Israelites as well. Moses wisely discerns that if the Israelites equate every instance of these common skin diseases with God's punishment of sin, then most Israelites will regularly, if not constantly, feel punished by God for their sins, and being supposedly under regular or constant punishment from God will lead the Israelites to erroneously conclude that they must be sinful in their true identity. To counteract that false conclusion without ignoring the spiritual distress that people feel regarding leprosy, Moses makes the point that leprosy is uncleanness rather than an indication of sin. This categorization will give the leper spiritual consolation while time passes and the skin condition heals, which it most likely will. Although, Moses also knows that the classification of leprosy as uncleanness will not totally remove the belief that leprosy is a punishment from God for the leper's sins. Therefore, Moses also prescribes that sacrificial offerings be made for a healed leper.^{cccxii}

Furthermore, contact with an unclean person or object sometimes makes the other person unclean as well. For instance, a woman in her time of menstruation is considered unclean, and anyone who touches her or anything that she sits upon is also then considered unclean.^{cccxiii} The vulnerability, fear, and premature despair involved in this contagious uncleanness concerns the concepts of sexual immorality and death. Menstruation is a sign of sexual maturity in a woman, so the further connotation is the potential for her to practice sexual immorality, which, as described above, would be a concern for everyone in her family. Menstruation also implies the concept of death to the ancient Near Easterner because persistent blood loss is often a precursor to death. The menstruating woman has this spirit of uncleanness and so too does anyone who comes into direct or indirect contact with her. Namely, the people who are most likely to come into contact with her are her family members, and the reminder of her sexual maturity will develop in them a spirit of vulnerability, fear, and premature despair regarding her potential for sexual immorality and the calamity that such a sin would be for the family. Additionally, they will also develop a spirit of vulnerability, fear, and premature despair about death, which is a calamity in any family. Again, we may think that these connotations are illogical and unreasonable, but Levitical uncleanness is not about logic and reason but, rather, perspective and perception.

The Bible prescribes various purification practices to remove uncleanness. For instance, the husband and wife who have had sexual intercourse are to purify themselves by bathing and waiting until the evening, at which point they are considered clean.^{cccxiv} As with any ritual, these purification practices work nothing in and of themselves but are only occasions of symbolism and time to help the unclean person to dispel his spirit of vulnerability, fear, and premature despair. Indeed, a man should only engage in a purification ritual because he believes that spirit is inappropriate for him given that he believes again that his true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and thus permanently perfectly righteous. The purification ritual is meant to express, maintain, and amplify those beliefs. In our example about the married couple, after their bathing and the passage of several hours, the memory of the sexual intercourse, and all

of its negative connotations, will have faded in the minds of the husband and wife. In other words, the spirits of the husband and wife will be restored to a clean state.

The reason that we, as the modern people of God, do not follow this code of Levitical cleanness is simply because many of the activities and circumstances listed in the Bible as conveying uncleanness do not make us feel the same vulnerability, fear, and premature despair that the ancient Israelites felt. To give an example of a modern situation that would convey uncleanness to a man, consider a male janitor in an office building. One of his duties is to clean the bathrooms, including the women's bathrooms. Before entering the women's bathroom, he announces himself loudly to ensure that nobody is currently using it, and he then places a sign in front of the door to ensure that nobody tries to use the bathroom while he is cleaning it. Despite the fact that the man is doing nothing wrong, he still feels uneasy simply because generally-speaking, it is wrong for a man to be in the women's bathroom. His presence there has the connotation in his mind, irrational though it may be, of him being accused of moral depravation and suffering the calamitous effects of such an accusation.

Finally, another way of thinking about uncleanness is that it is the same thing as “anxiety” or “worrying.” We worry about all kinds of things that are often ridiculous because of the unlikelihood of their occurrence, but those worries nonetheless create in our spirits the genuine feelings of vulnerability, fear, and premature despair regarding potential sin and/or calamity. Worrying and Levitical uncleanness are fundamentally the same: a mentally simulated actualization of a feared possible occurrence that would convey the impression that you – in both your empirical identity and true identity – are dishonorable in the judgment of God. The purification from worry is to take some time to remember that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, that you are therefore permanently perfectly righteous in your true identity, and that God has forgiven all of your past, present, and future sins because of your true identity.

Clean and Unclean Foods

Objects can be clean and unclean as well, namely in terms of whether or not they render uncleanness to people who come into contact with them. One of the more famous examples of Levitical uncleanness is the list of foods that are unclean for the Israelites. This list is found in Leviticus chapter 11.

Eating or touching – that is, touching the carcass of – prohibited animals is only uncleanness rather than sin because given the periodic scarcity of food that occurs in the Near East, many Israelites

likely ate of a prohibited animal at least once in their lives. Furthermore, if an unclean animal died within the Israelites' camp, they would have to touch it to remove it. Therefore, like all uncleanness, eating or touching the carcass of a prohibited animal is a circumstance that sometimes cannot be avoided. While Jesus declares all foods to be clean in Mark 7:18-19 and while Peter discerns the same in Acts 10:10-16, it is worthwhile to understand the logic behind the Old Testament prohibitions against these foods. Generally speaking, the unclean animals are those that the ancient Israelite associates with death in some way. Death is obviously a calamity, and uncleanness is having a spirit of vulnerability, fear, and premature despair regarding some potential sin and/or calamity. As a disclaimer, my purpose in this section is not to give a detailed explanation of every animal that is clean or unclean but, rather, to describe the emotional logic used to make that distinction.

Consider Leviticus 17:10, in which Moses records the words of Yahweh as "*Any man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who live as foreigners among them, who eats any kind of blood, I will set my face against that soul who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people.*" Given the context of Leviticus chapters 11 and 17, eating blood seems to be a sin only when it is done directly, willfully, and brazenly. For example, if a man hunts an animal and then consumes it without first draining its blood, then he commits a sin. Alternatively, if a man has an abundance of foods available to him but chooses to eat carrion, in which the blood has congealed and cannot be removed, he commits a sin. However, if a man has no food available to him except carrion, his consumption of the congealed blood in it is considered only uncleanness to him.^{ccxv}

Carnivorous animals are unclean for the Israelites to eat because the Biblical Israelite associates consumption of them with a vicarious violation of Leviticus 17:10. Namely, a carnivorous animal kills its prey and eats it immediately without first draining its blood, so the carnivore consumes that blood. If an Israelite eats a carnivore, even if he drains the blood from the animal first, then he indirectly consumes the blood that the carnivore consumed. Regarding a man who consumes blood, God promises to "*cut him off from among his people,*" and that phrase means that God will kill him.^{ccxvi} The Israelite who eats a carnivore is unclean because he **fears** that by indirectly consuming blood, he has sinned and motivated God to kill him. In the event that he only touches an unclean animal's carcass without eating it, such as by carrying it away from the camp, he is still unclean because of his mental association of the unclean animal with the consumption of blood and thus with sin and death. Of course, the man has not committed a sin because he has not directly, willfully, and brazenly consumed blood, so we would argue that he should not fear that he has committed such a sin. However, remember that Levitical uncleanness is about feelings not rational thinking.

Significantly, Leviticus chapter 11 does not phrase the prohibition as being against carnivores but, rather, as being against animals that do not "*chew the cud,*" which is a reference to the fact that

many herbivores regurgitate their food, chew it again, and then swallow it again.^{cccxvii} These animals are clean not because they chew the cud but, rather, because by chewing the cud, they are easily identified as herbivores, who have no occasion to consume blood from other animals. In other words, “*chew the cud*” is just a convenient way of categorizing animals that are clean to the Israelites because they are herbivores.

Animals whose torsos are close to the ground are also unclean. Leviticus chapter 11 does not phrase the prohibition as being against animals that are close to the ground but, rather, as being against those animals that do not have a parted hoof. That choice of categorization is just a convenient way of referring to most of the mammals that have torsos close to the ground. To the ancient Israelite mind, ground that is unmonitored conveys uncleanness to the person that comes into contact with it because if the ground is unmonitored, then a man could have been buried there at some time in the past unbeknownst to the person who now walks on that ground.^{cccxviii,cccxix} Contact with and even nearness to a dead body renders a person unclean, as does contact with a grave.^{cccx} Animals that are close to the ground are also close to graves that are in the ground, so if an Israelite eats or merely touches one of those animals, he becomes unclean because in doing so, he has possibly made indirect contact with a grave. The thought of that indirect contact makes him think of the calamity of death, namely the fact that he, too, will die someday.

Camels are an exception to this logic, for they are herbivores and stand tall off the ground yet are considered an unclean food because they do not have parted hooves. The reason that camels are an unclean food is likely that they are very valuable pack animals, for they can carry heavy loads and traverse great distances with little sustenance. Thus, if an Israelite were to eat a camel, such consumption would connote to him the concept of death because of his own great economic loss in doing so. Likewise, donkeys and mules have unparted hooves, but they are likely considered unclean for consumption more so because they are economically valuable for work and transportation rather than because of their proximity to the ground.

The rules regarding insects as food are based upon whether or not the given insect is associated with dead bodies. Those that are so associated are unclean whereas those that are not are clean. Birds of prey are unclean because they are primarily observed to eat dead animals whereas other birds are primarily observed to eat seeds and so are considered to be clean. Shellfish are unclean because they are bottom-feeders – that is, they feed on the ground under the sea – and again, unmonitored ground is associated with death in the mind of the ancient Israelite.

Admittedly, an astute reader of Leviticus 11 may argue that the chapter does not perfectly accord with this logic regarding death and unclean foods. For example, clean animals still walk and lay on the ground and may possibly walk or lay upon a grave, so why are they not unclean? Also, locusts

are considered to be clean food even though they destroy crops and can thus lead to starvation and death among the Israelites. Ultimately, it is important to understand that for all the commands regarding Levitical uncleanness, the reasoning is based upon prevailing perceptions in the Israelites' minds rather than factual logic. In other words, the logic of why a given animal is or is not associated with death in their minds may not be perfectly consistent, but it is still the reasoning used for the designation of certain foods as unclean.

The Priesthood

Definitions

Part of the Law of God is that the Israelites, under the direction of Moses, should build the Ark of the Covenant, build the Tabernacle, and establish a priesthood to serve in it. The Ark of the Covenant was basically an ornate “chest”^{cccxxi} that contained the stone tablets upon which were written the Ten Commandments.^{cccxxii} The Tabernacle was, in its most basic description, a tent with a courtyard around it. The courtyard contained the altar upon which the animal sacrifices were offered. The tent was divided into two parts, the most sacred of which contained the Ark of the Covenant. This most sacred section, often called the “Holy of Holies,” was considered to be the meeting-place between Yahweh and the High Priest once per year.^{cccxxiii, cccxxiv} The Tabernacle generally, and the Holy of Holies specifically, was the dwelling-place of God among the Israelites,^{cccxxv} albeit in a somewhat figurative and symbolic way since God is present in all places. Later in the history of the Israelites, the Tabernacle was replaced with the Temple, which had multiple iterations. The priesthood was composed of a High Priest, who was the leader and most prominent member of the priesthood, and the common priests. Collectively, they performed in the Tabernacle and Temple the rituals prescribed in the Law of God. The population of the priesthood was restricted to Aaron and His direct male descendants.

This description of the Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle, and the priesthood is intentionally extremely brief because my purpose in the subsequent sections is to describe the doctrinal significance of the priesthood. If you are interested in learning more about the physical and logistical characteristics of the Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle, and the Priesthood, I recommend reading the first five books of the Bible, an excellent book by E.P. Sanders titled Judaism: Practice and Belief: 63BCE-66CE, and another excellent work titled The Temple: its Ministry and Services by Alfred Edersheim.

The Purpose of the Priesthood

The priesthood of Israel is meant to represent all the Israelites and really all the rest of humanity as well by virtue of the Law of God being an expression of the original covenant that applies to all humanity. More specifically, the priesthood is meant to represent all humanity as we are perceived and judged by Yahweh. The High Priest is the primary figurehead of the Israelite priesthood and thus the primary symbol of God’s perspective and judgment of all people. In other words, the priests are an example to all people of what Yahweh thinks about all people. It is certainly

tempting to conclude that the members of the priesthood are in some way special to Yahweh over and above the rest of the Israelites simply because membership in the priesthood is restricted to Aaron and his direct male descendants and because they minister closest to the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle. However, that exclusive membership, while it is certainly an honor to that lineage, is exclusive only so that the rituals of the Tabernacle and priesthood will be properly upheld. Every ritual prescribed in the Law of God expresses the covenant truth and its implications in some way, so it is very important that the rituals be performed accurately lest their meaning be corrupted or lost.

One indication that the priesthood is meant to represent all the Israelites is that the priesthood is **delegated** to Aaron and his sons by Moses. In Exodus chapter 29, Moses discerns from Yahweh an entire series of activities that he is to perform in order to establish Aaron and his sons in the priesthood. The details of those activities are less important than the fact that Moses is to perform them. Moses is the leader of the Israelites, so the public display of him consecrating Aaron and his sons for the priesthood conveys the message that the priesthood belongs ultimately to the Israelites, as a whole, and that the priesthood is no better than the rest of the Israelites but is rather in service to the Israelites.

Some people may object that the priests minister to Yahweh, so they are in service to Him.^{cccxxvi} That is certainly true, but the only thing with which Yahweh needs assistance is convincing the Israelites of their true identity in Him and the implications of it. The priesthood represents the eternal, permanent judgment of God about all humanity: that we are His perfect image and likeness in our true identity and perfectly righteous in our true identity as a result. This is why it is important to understand the priesthood as representing all humanity, not just the Israelites, because the covenant truth is true of all humanity, not just the Israelites. Thus, the priests' ministry to Yahweh is really ministry to all people. The Israelite priesthood is for the direct benefit of people, not for the direct benefit of God. Of course, their work does indirectly benefit God because He wants people to know and believe the covenant truth so that they will love Him and know that He loves them.

The priests are not better than the rest of humanity but, rather, are to be reminders to all humanity of our true identity in God and the righteousness of it. This reminder takes the form of the priests ministering in God's dwelling-place and eating portions of the sacrifices made to God.^{cccxxvii} This ministry creates the impression that the priests are part of God's household, and in Near Eastern culture, everyone who dwells in a man's household, even servants, are part of his collective, share his collective identity, and thus have a true identity that is honorable in his judgment.^{cccxxviii} In other words, the priests are portrayed as being part of God's collective, sharing God's collective identity, and thus having a true identity that is perfectly honorable in God's judgment. However, these activities of the priesthood are not meant to distinguish the priests as being specially righteous but,

rather, to convey the message to all people that we are all perfectly righteous in our true identity. In other words, when the Israelites see the priests perform their duties, they are meant to interpret the priests as representing them and thus further interpret that they are all worthy of such close nearness to and intimacy with Yahweh. They are meant to interpret that they, just as much as the priests, are part of God's collective, share God's collective identity, and thus have a true identity that is perfectly honorable in God's judgment.

The priests are to be scrupulously clean in the Levitical sense.^{ccxxix} Remember that Levitical uncleanness is a mentally simulated actualization of a feared possible occurrence, which would convey the impression that you are dishonorable in the judgment of God.^{ccxxx} The man who fully believes in his permanent true identity as God's perfect image and likeness and the permanent perfect righteousness of it has no Levitical uncleanness because his perception of his righteousness is entirely based upon his permanent true identity. Thus, it makes sense that the priests, who represent that true identity of all humanity and the implications of it, should be scrupulously clean in the Levitical sense.

Finally, the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies once per year, at which time he is in the direct presence of Yahweh. As the High Priest represents the true identity and righteousness of all humanity, this ritual conveys the impression that all humanity is worthy of being in the direct presence of Yahweh. Furthermore, recall that the Holy of Holies contains the Ark of the Covenant, in which are the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, and the Ten Commandments, as well as the rest of the Law of God, express the covenant truth that applies to all humanity. Thus, the further connotation of the High Priest's entry into the Holy of Holies is that the covenant truth is still applicable to all humanity. Namely, despite our sins, our true identity is still the perfect image and likeness of Yahweh, so we are still perfectly righteous in our true identity and accepted by God. By extension then, the ritual also signifies that God has forgiven our sins.

Clothing

Exodus chapters 28 and 39 provide a detailed account of the clothing worn by the priests while performing their duties, and I want to spend some time analyzing this description because the priests' clothing expresses their role of representing humanity as we are perceived and judged by God. To begin, the common priests wear a turban, trousers, and tunic that are all made of white linen, or at least as white as natural linen.^{ccxxxii,ccxxxiii} Only their sashes – i.e. belts^{ccxxxiii} – have other colors in them, and those colors match the colors and their symbolism in the High Priest's clothing, which I will describe in a moment. The color white is an excellent choice for the priests' role of symbolizing God's judgment of humanity because white symbolizes honor,^{ccxxxiv} and all humanity is permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God – i.e. permanently perfectly righteous –

because of our permanent true identity as His perfect image and likeness. Put another way, the white clothing symbolizes that sinfulness is never part of our true identity and that sin thus does not accurately express our true identity nor change it.

The High Priest's full outfit is very ornate compared to the outfit of the common priest because the role of the High Priest is very prestigious. However, the prestige and honor of the High Priest is representative of the prestige and honor that all humanity has in the judgment of God. Before describing the ornamentation, I will begin by saying that the High Priest wears, as the foundation of his outfit, the same clothing as the common priests, so the symbolic meaning of that clothing, as described above, is present with the High Priest as well. The extra items that he wears, though, include much color, gold, and embellishments that are befitting of only the most honorable of men, and since the High Priest is clothed in accordance with the commands of Yahweh, he is clearly considered to be highly honorable by Yahweh. Again though, the High Priest represents the judgment of God about all humanity, so all of the prestige, honor, and glory in the judgment of God that is expressed by the High Priest's outfit is equally applicable to every human being.

It is worth noting that the color scheme of the High Priest's clothing matches the color scheme used in the Tabernacle. The description of the Tabernacle includes, "*You shall make a veil of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen, with cherubim. It shall be the work of a skillful workman. You shall hang it on four pillars of acacia overlaid with gold; their hooks shall be of gold, on four sockets of silver.*"^{cccxxxv} "*You shall make a screen for the door of the Tent, of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen [...] You shall make for the screen five pillars of acacia, and overlay them with gold. Their hooks shall be of gold. You shall cast five sockets of bronze for them.*"^{cccxxxvi} The description of the High Priest's outfit includes "*They shall make the ephod of gold, blue, purple, scarlet, and fine twined linen, the work of the skillful workman*"^{cccxxxvii} "*You shall make a breastplate of judgment, the work of the skillful workman; like the work of the ephod you shall make it; of gold, of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen, you shall make it.*"^{cccxxxviii} The message conveyed by this similarity in color schemes is that the High Priest belongs in the Tabernacle – that is, in God's dwelling-place. Since the High Priest, and the entire priesthood, represents all people, the further implication is that all people belong in God's dwelling-place in nearness to and intimacy with Him. This all makes perfect sense because humanity's true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. We are part of God's collective, so we should dwell with Him, just as a Near Eastern man's family dwells with him.

Furthermore, the High Priest's clothing contains elements that directly indicate that he represents all the Israelites, and as I have described previously, what applies to the Israelites applies to all humanity. First, on each of his shoulders, the high priest wears an onyx stone engraved with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel – six on each stone. Exodus 28:12 makes clear the High Priestly role of representing the Israelites as they are perceived by Yahweh: "Aaron shall bear

their names before Yahweh on his two shoulders for a memorial." Second, the High Priest wears a breastplate upon which are mounted twelve gemstones, each one engraved with the name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. This breastplate is called the "*breastplate of judgment,*"^{cccxxxix} and that name also indicates the High Priestly role of representing the Israelites. Remember, this breastplate contains gemstones for the twelve tribes, so what else could the judgment of God be about the Israelites other than that they are incredibly precious to Him, like gemstones, and are worthy of close association with Him, just as the High Priest ministers in the Tabernacle while wearing this breastplate? If we are so precious and worthy in the judgment of Yahweh, then surely we are nothing less than His perfect image and likeness in our true identity and thus perfectly righteous in our true identity.

Additionally, Exodus 28:30 states, "*You shall put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim; and they shall be on Aaron's heart, when he goes in before Yahweh. Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel on his heart before Yahweh continually.*" The Bible does not provide specific details on what "*the Urim and the Thummim*" – that is, their physical appearance – and the original Hebrew words, which are only transliterated as Urim and Thummim, mean "lights"^{cccxl} and "perfections,"^{cccxli} respectively. Many scholars believe that "*the Urim and the Thummim*" were divination tools, and the Jewish Encyclopedia makes a good argument that those terms actually refer to the twelve gemstones described previously.^{cccxlii} Indeed, the very fact that Exodus chapter 28 gives such great detail on the High Priest's clothing but then no detail about the Urim and Thummim implies that the Urim and Thummim are simply alternative terms for items that were already described, namely the twelve gemstones of the breastplate.

"Lights" and "perfections" as definitions of those terms are also telling because it is the tribes of Israel – and by extension, all humanity – that are the lights and perfections in the judgment of Yahweh. Remember, light is a symbol of honor,^{cccxliii} so lights and perfections would refer to perfect honor. It is humanity that has perfect honor in God's judgment because our true identity is His perfect image and likeness. That true identity and the perfect righteousness of it are the judgment meant in the term "*breastplate of judgment*" and in the statement "*Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel on his heart before Yahweh continually.*" That judgment being on Aaron's heart has three meanings. First, it refers to the fact that Aaron wears the breastplate on his heart in the sense that it is upon his chest. Second, the Hebrew word used here for "heart" can also mean "mind,"^{cccxliv} and Aaron is to be mindful of his responsibility to fulfill his duties faithfully so that he properly communicates to the people God's judgment of them. Third, Aaron shall be confident while performing his duties because he knows that he represents Yahweh's judgment of the Israelites that they are perfectly righteous in their true identity. Aaron bears the judgment of the Israelites "*before Yahweh*" in the sense that He wears the breastplate that represents that judgment while ministering before God in His Temple.

Given that divination is prohibited by the Law of God,^{cccxlv} it is highly unlikely that Moses would discern from a Yahweh-vision that the High Priest's outfit should include literal divination tools. I will go further and say that divination by the means of the Urim and the Thummim simply refers to discussion and consensus-seeking with the twelve tribes of Israel on any given matter. Numbers 27:18-21 supports this interpretation:

Yahweh said to Moses, “Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him. Set him before Eleazar the priest, and before all the congregation; and commission him in their sight. You shall give authority to him, that all the congregation of the children of Israel may obey. He shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before Yahweh. At his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the children of Israel with him, even all the congregation.”

Joshua will be the next leader of the Israelites, after Moses dies, and Moses discerns from Yahweh that while Joshua will have that authority, Eleazar, the High Priest, will be a liaison and advocate for Joshua with the rest of the Israelites. Moses writes, “*He shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before Yahweh.*” Moses uses the word “Urim” as an abbreviation for the Urim and the Thummim,^{cccxlvii} and he uses it to refer to the congregation of the Israelites, who are the “lights and perfections” in the judgment of (i.e. “before”) Yahweh.

It is important to understand that in Near Eastern nomadic culture, leaders of a tribe or confederation of tribes often only rule by the consent of the tribesmen. Namely, a leader does not enforce his decision through the threat of violence, but, rather, he must convince his tribesmen of the wisdom of his decision.^{cccxlviii} Eleazar, as High Priest, has great esteem and honor among the Israelites, so his advocacy for Joshua's decisions will help convince the Israelites to follow those decisions. Eleazar's “inquiring” for Joshua with the congregation will take the form of Eleazar expressing his agreement with Joshua's decision and asking the other prominent Israelites what they think of the decision. Of course, the very fact that Eleazar has expressed his approval will almost certainly cause the other prominent tribesman to agree as well. Thus, the relationship between Joshua and Eleazar is to be very similar to the relationship that existed between Moses and Aaron.

In this example then, we see how the reference to the Urim and the Thummim conveys the judgment from God that all the Israelites are equally honorable. Namely, no one person is to dominate the others, for rule is to be by consent. Furthermore, even though the leader of the Israelites discerns commands from God, the Israelites are still meant to agree with those commands. God clearly judges the Israelites to be as strong as He is in their true identity since He seeks their **willingness** to follow His commands.

Finally, the High Priest wears a sign on his turban, described as follows: “*a plate of pure gold, and engrave on it, like the engravings of a signet, ‘HOLY TO YAHWEH.’ [...] It shall be on Aaron’s forehead, and Aaron shall bear the iniquity of the holy things, which the children of Israel shall make holy in all their holy gifts; and it shall be always on his forehead, that they may be accepted before Yahweh.*”^{cccxlvi} First, the fact that the High Priest, who represents all humanity, has that sign on his forehead is a blunt statement of God’s judgment of all humanity. Namely, we are all holy to Yahweh – i.e. set apart for Yahweh^{cccxlxi} – and the reason for that holiness is our true identity as His perfect image and likeness. Furthermore, by wearing the sign, the High Priest expresses his belief in his holiness to God, and he serves as an example that the Israelites should believe in their equal holiness to God.

However, the Scripture also makes a statement about Aaron, the High Priest, bearing “*the iniquity of the holy things...*” The meaning there is that the High Priest is ultimately responsible for the rituals of the Tabernacle being done properly. The specific reference here is to the gifts and sacrifices made in the Tabernacle to Yahweh. Namely, they must be in accordance with the commands of the Law of God. The High Priest has the burden – i.e. “*the iniquity*” – of ensuring the propriety of the gifts and sacrifices that occur in the Tabernacle, such that they express and symbolize the offeror’s belief in the covenant truth and its implications. Such gifts and sacrifices are acceptable to Yahweh because they express and symbolize the offeror’s belief that he is acceptable and holy to Him – i.e. they express and symbolize the offeror’s belief that his true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and thus permanently perfectly righteous. Such gifts are holy to both God and the offeror because they express and symbolize the collective and collective identity that is shared by Yahweh and humanity. The High Priest must wear the plate on his turban as a reminder to himself and others that he has this responsibility and authority over the gifts and sacrifices. Indeed, it makes sense that the High Priest, as a symbol of the holiness to God of all people, must ensure that the gifts and sacrifices that are meant to be holy to God and to people are actually so holy.

Tithing

Tithing refers to the commands in the Law of God which state that a tenth of a man’s income is to be given to some other party. In the Old Testament, the commands for tithing are numerous and superficially contradictory, so a detailed analysis of each command would likely create confusion, rather than understanding, in this explanation. Instead, the Jewish Encyclopedia provides an excellent, concise summary of the tithing commands in the Old Testament:

There is apparently a discrepancy between the Book of Numbers and that of Deuteronomy with regard to the tithe. In [Numbers 18:21-26] it is stated that "all the tenth in Israel" is given to the [lay] Levites "for an inheritance"; as they had no part in the land, the tithe was to be their principal source of sustenance. On the other hand, the [lay] Levites themselves were required to give the priests a tenth of all the tithes received by them. [Deuteronomy 14:22-29], however, enjoins the annual tithing of the increase of the field only; this was to be eaten before the Lord, that is to say, in the city in which the Temple was built. But if the distance to such city was so great as to render the transportation of all the tithes impracticable, the people might convert the tithe into money and spend the sum in the city on eatables, etc. ("whatsoever thy soul desireth"; ib. verse 26). Every third year the tithes were not to be carried to the city of the Temple, but were to be stored at home ("within thy gates"), and "the Levite, the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow" were to "eat and be satisfied" (ib. verse 29). It is to be concluded that, the seventh year being a Sabbatical year [Leviticus 25:1-7] and no tithing being permissible therein, the tithe of the first, second, fourth, and fifth years of every cycle of seven years had to be brought to the Temple and eaten by the landowner and his family, while the tithe of the third and sixth years was to be left at home for the poor.^{ccl}

While that description details the "discrepancy between the Book of Numbers and that of Deuteronomy with regard to the tithe," that discrepancy is only in form rather than in substance. Namely, all of the commands in the Old Testament regarding tithing convey the impression of reciprocal generosity. In Near Eastern culture, expressions of honor from one person to another are expected to be reciprocated, and this model is seen in reciprocal generosity.^{ccli,cclii} In the context of tithing, a man is commanded by God to give his tithe to a certain party or purpose. The reciprocal generosity in tithing is that the Israelite recognizes that God is the One Who has given him his income from agriculture, etc., and the Israelite is meant to reciprocate that generosity by giving a tenth of that income to God in the form of giving it to whomever or whatever purpose God specifies.

The greater implication of Near Eastern reciprocal generosity is the establishment, maintenance, and/or strengthening of a relationship of mutual esteem – i.e. mutual honor – between the two parties, and the tithes are meant to express, maintain, and amplify the Israelite's perception of that kind of relationship between himself and Yahweh. Furthermore, the perception of being honorable in the judgment of God, which is fostered by the act of tithing, will help the Israelite to better believe that his true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. This is the entire purpose of tithing: it is to be a means by which the offeror expresses, maintains, and amplifies his perception of his true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God and the perfect righteousness of it.

Keep in mind as well that when the Israelite gives his tithe to the party whom God chooses – i.e. the Levites, the poor, or his own family members on a vacation in Jerusalem – he will be shown esteem by those people, and that honor from others will help him to believe all the more that he is honorable in the judgment of God. After all, the Israelite is meant to remember that it is God Who gave him the income sufficient to pay the tithe, so he will know himself to be effectively honored by God when those people honor him.

People often erroneously point to Malachi 3:8-12 as proof that tithing is transactional in the sense that God will not deliver His blessings to a man if he does not tithe.

Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me! But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with the curse; for you rob me, even this whole nation. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house, and test me now in this,” says Yahweh of Armies, “if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there will not be enough room for. I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast its fruit before its time in the field,” says Yahweh of Armies. “All nations shall call you blessed, for you will be a delightful land,” says Yahweh of Armies.

The prophet Malachi makes the point that if you withhold your tithes, you dishonor God. First, any disobedience of God’s commands implies that you do not believe that He has the strength to enforce those commands. Second, if the Israelites do not pay their tithes, then they withhold sustenance to the priests, lay Levites, and the poor, and the result is that God appears ungenerous to those parties. In Near Eastern culture, to be ungenerous is to be dishonorable.^{ccliii} Therefore, by withholding tithes, a man not only “robs” God of those tithes but also His honor in the judgment of those impoverished parties. Such a man also robs the honor of the whole nation of the Israelites because all the Israelites are part of God’s collective and thus share in His honor in the judgment of people.

A man who considers himself to be part of God’s collective, as God’s perfect image and likeness in his true identity, would only do things that maintain and increase God’s honor in the judgment of people because he shares in the honor of God’s collective. Furthermore, a man who considers himself to be part of God’s collective is certain that God will not allow him to become impoverished through his efforts to bring honor to God. He is certain that God will instead “open [to him] the windows of heaven, and pour [him] out a blessing, that there will not be enough room for.” Therefore, only a man who does not consider himself to be part of God’s collective would dishonor him by withholding his tithes. Ultimately, the passage from Malachi is only meant to indicate the nature of tithing as being a tool of expressing, maintaining, and amplifying your belief in your true identity in God and its implications. Tithing does not make God want to prosper you

but only expresses, maintains, and amplifies your belief that you are somebody whom God already and permanently wants to prosper because you are permanently part of His collective. You demonstrating that belief by tithing motivates God to send you blessings only because His delivery of them will validate your belief.

Failing to tithe does not, in itself, cause God to withhold certain blessings from you, but, rather, your disbelief in the covenant truth and its implications yields that outcome. Furthermore, not all failures to tithe are caused by such disbelief. Indeed, if your financial situation is such that giving a tenth of your income will cause you to feel burdened by your faith in God, then you should not give that amount. If the giving puts such a strain upon your budget that it causes you to feel dishonored by God, then you should not give, for the dishonor that you perceive will only cause you to doubt your true identity in God and its implications. Of course, you must examine your financial situation to see if the burden is really caused by the tithing or by your addiction to luxuries, but that is a matter for your own contemplation. Nevertheless, whether you tithe or not, your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, and the implications of it permanently apply to you.

Chapter 6: Forgiveness

Definition

The definition of forgiveness is alluded to by Jesus in Mark 11:25, “*Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone.*” Lack of forgiveness means that you hold some offense against a person whereas the presence of forgiveness means that you do not hold that offense against him. In theory, this definition is easily accepted, but in practice, it creates difficult questions for us. For instance, if a person has a history of treating you badly, is it a lack of forgiveness for you to take that history into consideration in your future interactions with that person? In the same vein, is our entire criminal justice system a manifestation of a lack of forgiveness since we punish people who commit crimes?

We must understand what it means to not hold a sin against a person, and the best way to understand that concept is to look to the example of God, Who has perfect forgiveness for all people. As I previously described, God, from the very beginning of time, has forgiven all the sins that every human being will ever commit. Indeed, He must have done so because if He had not, He would not have continued to perpetuate this earth and support the existence and growth of humanity after the introduction of sin into the world. We sin when we erroneously believe that our true identity is sinful – i.e. unlike God and dishonorable in His judgment. God does not agree with that belief. He knows that sinfulness is never part of Himself – i.e. He is never unlike Himself nor dishonorable in His own judgment – so He also knows that sinfulness cannot be part of our true identity because our true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness and thus permanently perfectly honorable in His judgment. Therefore, He knows that sin does not accurately express our true identity nor change it but is rather only the product of deception worked upon us by evil.^{ccliv} Accordingly, God has forgiven all of our sins from the very beginning. Nevertheless, I have also described how God sends us corrective action in response to our sins for the purpose of leading us away from that sinful behavior and the deception of our spirits that motivates such behavior.^{cclv} Does the fact that God sends us corrective action for our sins mean that God does not forgive our sins? Of course not!

God never holds our sins against us, but the “us” that He **never** holds our sins against is our true identity, not our empirical identity. In other words, we sin because we erroneously believe that our true identity is sinful – i.e. unlike God and dishonorable in His judgment. Nevertheless, no matter how much we sin, God does not agree with our erroneous belief – that is, God does not attribute sinfulness to our true identity. God does not conclude from our sinful behavior that our true

identity has changed into sinfulness. However, God sends us corrective action in response to our sins because He knows that in order for us to have peace of mind that we are permanently perfectly righteous – that is, in order for us to have eternal life with God^{ccclvi} – we must know and believe our true identity to permanently be God’s perfect image and likeness, which we do not believe when we have a sinful spirit and behave in accordance with it. In other words, God works corrective action in our lives because He wants our empirical identity – i.e. our spirits and our behavior motivated by our spirits – to match our true identity. God knows that we must change our spirit unto belief in the covenant truth and its implications, and having so changed our spirit, we will change our behavior from sinful to righteous. Part of that changed spirit in us is knowing and believing that God has already forgiven our true identity of all our sins because He knows that our sins do not accurately express our true identity nor change it.

Any statement about God’s forgiveness that is phrased in such a way that it indicates new forgiveness from God subsequent to Creation is either an externalized expression^{ccclvii} of a man’s new belief in and acceptance of God’s preexisting forgiveness of all his sins for his true identity or a reference to God’s new forgiveness of one or more of his sins for his empirical identity. Again, God has forgiven your true identity of all your sins from the very beginning, but He does hold your sins against your empirical identity for as long as you do not sufficiently believe in the covenant truth and its implications. Accordingly, He sends you corrective action to improve your belief. God forgives your empirical identity of your sins when you have and sensorially manifest a spirit of sufficient belief in the covenant truth and its implications, such that you are confident that you are permanently perfectly righteous in your true identity. At that point, the corrective action ends because it is no longer needed.

Some people might object that in Matthew 12:31-32, Jesus seems to say that there is a sin that is never forgiven by God:

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age, or in that which is to come.

However, look at the seeming contradictions in His words. Namely, how can blasphemy against the Holy Spirit not be forgiven by God when **every** sin and blasphemy is forgiven by Him? How can speaking against the Holy Spirit not be forgiven, but speaking against Jesus, the Son of Man, can be forgiven even though Jesus manifests and represents the Holy Spirit? These statements seem to be contradictions until you realize that Jesus is making the point that **all** sins are blasphemy against the Holy Spirit – either as literal words or in the sense that one figuratively speaks through his actions – because all sins are transgressions of God’s Law, which expresses the

Holy Spirit. Additionally, when you speak against Jesus, you speak against the Holy Spirit because Jesus manifests and represents the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is composed of the covenant truth and its implications, and the man who does not believe in both – i.e. the man who does not have the Holy Spirit as his own spirit – does not believe that God has forgiven his sins. Indeed, he does not believe in the permanent perfect righteousness of his true identity, so he has no reason to believe that God does not hold his sins against his true identity. In this passage, Jesus externalizes the perspective of such a man by portraying God as withholding forgiveness of his sins because they are motivated by his lack of belief in the covenant truth and its implications – i.e. his explicit or implicit blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Jesus' meaning here is not that God ever literally withholds forgiveness for any sin but, rather, that you will not believe in His forgiveness of your sins if you do not believe in the covenant truth and its implications. Jesus' words here are not a condemnation of sinners but, rather, a warning that we must all repent unto belief in the covenant truth and its implications in order to believe in God's preexisting forgiveness of all our sins. Put in a much more figurative way, in order to believe that God has forgiven your sins, you must remove the element of your sins that is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. You remove that element by repenting unto belief in the covenant truth and its implications, and that repentance comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

We should follow God's example in our forgiveness of each other. No matter how much or how severely a person sins, against you or God, you should never hold those sins against the person's true identity. That is, you should forgive a person in his true identity. You should never conclude from a person's sins that he is sinful in his true identity nor that his true identity is different from yours and different from God. Such a conclusion will eventually lead you to doubt that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God (and thus devoid of sinfulness) since you, too, commit sins. Thus, you will also doubt that God has already and permanently forgiven your sins for your true identity.

This is the meaning of Jesus' words in Matthew 7:1-5:

"Don't judge, so that you won't be judged. For with whatever judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but don't consider the beam that is in your own eye? Or how will you tell your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye,' and behold, the beam is in your own eye? You hypocrite! First remove the beam out of your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye.

There is nothing wrong with identifying the sins that other people commit and considering them to be sinners because of those sins. Rather, the kind of judgment that Jesus prohibits is concluding that a person's true identity is sinful because of his sins. Such a conclusion contradicts the covenant truth and will also cause you to doubt the applicability of the covenant truth to yourself. That doubt that you have about your true identity is Jesus' meaning where He says "*you will be judged*" and "*it will be measured to you.*" Namely, a Near Eastern man externalizes upon God his perspective of himself, and that self-perspective is greatly influenced by his judgments of other people.^{cclviii} Indeed, how can you be sure that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God despite your sins if you believe that another person's true identity is unlike God because he commits sins? Therefore, you cannot properly lead a person to repentance of any given sin that he has committed (i.e. "*remove the speck out of your brother's eye*") unless you first correct your own spirit unto belief that a man's sins do not accurately express his true identity nor change it (i.e. "*remove the beam out of your own eye*").

In fact, the Law of God makes it clear that we are not to willfully ignore the sins of others nor silently endure the hardships caused by those sins, for Leviticus 19:17 states, "*You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him.*" In other words, you should not hate a person because of his sin, for his true identity in God does not change as a result of his sin. Nevertheless, you should remonstrate with him about his sin to lead him to repentance for his benefit and yours. Of course, vengeance, in the sense of corrective action, belongs only to God.^{cclix} That is, such vengeance must be in accordance with the wisdom and will of God that all people should know and believe that their true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness and is thus permanently perfectly righteous. Punishments prescribed in the Law of God for certain sins are meant to lead the sinner and the victim of the sin to repentance – that is, to a renewed spirit of belief in the covenant truth and its implications. Indeed, a man's sins do not just express, maintain, and amplify his corrupted perspective of his true identity but can also corrupt the spirits of the victims of his sins regarding their true identity. After all, being dishonored – i.e. sinned against – by a person can cause you to doubt or disbelieve your true identity to permanently be the perfect image and likeness of God.

Furthermore, it is perfectly righteous for you to restrict your interactions with a person based upon the precedent of his past sinful behavior. You have already forgiven the person because you have a spirit of belief that all people, regardless of their sins, have a true identity that is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. You nevertheless restrict your interactions with that person only because you believe that he will likely sin against you again, and you want to protect your own spirit from strain and corruption resulting from those future sins. Indeed, often the best way to maintain a righteous spirit is to insulate yourself from opposition to it. Jesus speaks to this principle in Matthew 10:17, "*But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils, and in their synagogues they will scourge you,*" and Matthew 10:23, "*But when they persecute you in this city, flee into the next [...].*" Jesus also says "*whoever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him*

the other also,"^{ccclx} but He does not say that you should continue to spend time with the person who hits you.

Restricting your interactions with a person under those circumstances does not mean that you condemn the person's true identity but, rather, that you are only protecting your own spirit from corruption resulting from interaction with a person who clearly has a corrupted spirit of his own. The person can certainly reform his spirit and behavior, and you should consider incrementally reintroducing him back into your life if he has demonstrated sincere change in his spirit and behavior, such that you feel you can trust him to not return to his prior ways. Of course, avoidance can also be misused if you avoid a person because you believe that his sins have changed his true identity into one of sinfulness and accurately express it as being sinful.

Some people will object that God does not avoid any person no matter how much he sins, so how can we be righteous to avoid people because of their sin? The answer is that God can continue to interact with people despite their sins because God's Spirit about Himself cannot be corrupted. Our spirits about ourselves, however, can and often are corrupted by the sins of other people. Thus, while avoiding people who have sinned against you does not match God's behavior, it is still your attempt to preserve your agreement with God's Spirit that all people are permanently the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity and thus are permanently perfectly righteous in their true identity.

The logic of separating yourself from a wrongdoer is also the foundation of criminal justice systems in which the punishment for crime is incarceration. The incarceration not only protects the public from future harm by the criminal but also is meant to communicate to the criminal that he needs to repent of his corrupted spirit and his wrongdoing before he can rejoin society. The fact that the criminal is called to repent is meant to communicate society's belief that his crime does not accurately express his true identity nor change it.

Even in the case of corporal punishments, the Law of God makes it clear that they are not meant to portray the criminal as being different in his true identity from the rest of the community. Namely, Deuteronomy 25:1-3 describes a system of justice in which the righteous are to be justified and wrongdoers are to be declared guilty^{ccclxi} and punished but with the restriction that the wrongdoer not be "*degraded in your sight*":

If there is a controversy between men, and they come to judgment and the judges judge them, then they shall justify the righteous and condemn the wicked. It shall be, if the wicked man is worthy to be beaten, that the judge shall cause him to lie down and to be beaten before his face, according to his wickedness, by number.

He may sentence him to no more than forty stripes. He shall not give more, lest if he should give more and beat him more than that many stripes, then your brother will be degraded in your sight.

Moses establishes a justice system in which a transgressor is punished “*according to his wickedness, by number.*” In other words, two men who commit the same sin should receive the same punishment. However, Near Eastern tribal judges often impose the maximum punishment allowed by law and/or precedent in order to avoid being accused of favoritism.^{ccclxii} Accordingly, Moses also states that the maximum number of stripes that can be imposed is forty, for he assumes that every transgressor who is judged to deserve a beating will be sentenced to forty stripes. Any deviation from this system of consistent punishments would communicate that one transgressor is considered by the judge to be fundamentally worse than another transgressor. The implication would then be that not everybody has the same true identity and thus that not everybody has the true identity that is the permanent perfect image and likeness of God. By having consistent punishments for sins, everybody is meant to understand that sin is the problem, not the sinner – i.e. not the true identity of the sinner.

What about Capital Punishment?

Exodus 20:13 commands that we “*shall not murder,*” and the reason for that prohibition is that all people have the same true identity that is the perfect image and likeness of God. To murder somebody is to make the ultimate statement of your belief that he is weak in his true identity and thus not the perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity. However, one might object that there are instances in the Bible in which God is recorded as commanding homicide, but it is important to understand that these instances in which the Israelites discern God as commanding killing are all in the context of defending or restoring honor. The Israelites’ discernment of these commands contains externalization of their personal perspective and perception that their honor and/or God’s honor needs defending and/or restoration. The protection of one’s honor is very important because to the Biblical Israelite, one’s honor in the judgment of people is often equated with one’s honor in the judgment of God.^{ccclxiii} If a man is dishonorable in the judgment of people, then he will believe that he is dishonorable in the judgment of God. That is, he will not believe in the perfect righteousness of his true identity, and if he denies that righteousness, then he cannot believe that his true identity is God’s perfect image and likeness.

For instance, Leviticus 20:10 commands that adulterers and adulteresses both be put to death. They are to be killed because their adultery not only dishonors themselves but also their families, and the death of both transgressors most completely restores the honor that was lost by the families.^{ccclxiv} This is the ancient Near Eastern perspective, which is why Moses – a Near Easterner himself who was trying to successfully lead other Near Easterners – discerned Yahweh as

commanding death as the remedy to the dishonor worked by adultery. Remember that the Biblical Israelites equate behavior that is honorable in the judgment of people with behavior that is honorable in the judgment of God,^{ccclxv} and in Near Eastern culture, it is honorable for a man to defend his and his collective's honor.

Of course, the punishment of death is the ultimate dishonor to the adulterer and adulteress, and that dishonor transgresses the goal that punishments are meant to uphold and validate the true identity in God, and the righteousness of it, of both the victim and the transgressor. However, we must remember that Near Easterners, like most people in times of passionate emotion, such as the grief over the commission of adultery by a family member, do not think about the broader logical implications of their desire to restore lost honor. Rather, they simply prioritize the restoration of their honor over any concern about dishonoring the offender, and they believe that their behavior in the pursuit of that restoration is righteous.

Additionally, in Deuteronomy 32:39, Yahweh is recorded as saying "*I kill and I make alive.*" If Yahweh has the highest honor and declares murder to be a dishonorable behavior, then how can Yahweh kill? The answer is simply that the Israelites, particularly Moses in Deuteronomy 32:39, discern and interpret Yahweh's nature and behavior within the context of Near Eastern culture, psychology, and philosophy. Namely, if a man dishonors Yahweh with the extreme transgression that is worship of false, pagan Gods, which is part of the context of Deuteronomy 32:39, then the perfectly honorable Yahweh would be expected, according to the Near Eastern mind, to retaliate against that dishonor in order to restore and uphold His honor in the judgment of people.

Also, Moses discerns God as commanding the Israelites to not make peace with the inhabitants of Canaan but, rather, to "*utterly destroy them.*"^{ccclxvi} The context of that passage is that the Gentile inhabitants of Canaan worship false, pagan gods, and if the Israelites make peace with them, then they will lead the Israelites to worship those same gods and, thus, to forsake Yahweh. We can understand, then, that the command to kill these Gentiles is a means of defending the honor of Yahweh, in the judgment of people, from the dishonor that would be worked upon Him by any Israelites who would worship false, pagan gods under the influence of the Gentiles. The command to kill the pagan Gentiles is also a defense of the honor of the Israelites from the dishonor that they assume God will judge them to have if they do worship these false, pagan gods or allow such worship to occur in their land.

What about the modern, Western practice of abolishing capital punishment or at least restricting its use to the most heinous of crimes? Are such perspectives unrighteous since the Law of God commands capital punishment in certain scenarios? Not at all because the standard of spiritual righteousness is believing that your true identity is permanently God's perfect image and likeness.

Moreover, the purpose of the Law of God is to be a tool of faith in the covenant truth and its implications, including the righteousness that it yields to people. If, as a society, we reach a spiritual point where we confidently believe in our true identity in God and the perfect righteousness of it, despite the continued life of a person who behaves in contradiction to that true identity and righteousness, then the abstention from inflicting capital punishment is entirely righteous.

The same principle can be applied to the righteousness of sentences of lifetime imprisonment. If as a society, we release a criminal because we believe that he has sincerely repented of his crime and can be trusted to not reoffend, then the release is righteous so long as his freedom does not corrupt our belief in the covenant truth and its implications.

The same logic also applies to any punishments prescribed in the Bible that seem harsh or unreasonable to us in modern, Western culture. The punishment prescribed is simply that which, to the ancient Near Eastern mind, defends honor that is threatened or restores honor that has been lost and thus upholds and validates the true identity in God and the righteousness of it that belongs to all parties involved. Nevertheless, if we, as modern people, can defend and restore honor, and thus uphold and believe the covenant truth and its implications, with much more humane punishments or simply with forgiveness, then those humane punishments and/or forgiveness are just as righteous as the punishments commanded in the Bible. Jesus would argue that the greater righteousness is believing that you are supremely honorable in the judgment of God regardless of any dishonor that you suffer in life. Indeed, greater righteousness is to believe yourself to be permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God simply and solely because you are permanently the perfect image and likeness of God in your true identity.

Repentance and Atonement

As Christians, when we talk about God's forgiveness of our sins, we have to also speak about repentance and atonement because both of those concepts must come before God's forgiveness is effective in our spirits. Traditional Christian doctrine holds that repentance comes first, then atonement, and then God's forgiveness is received. The Greek word which is translated as "repent" means "to change one's mind."^{cclxvii} Sin is motivated by the erroneous beliefs that your true identity is not like God, and thus not righteous, and that you can make your true identity the perfect image and likeness of God, and thus perfectly righteous, by sinning.^{cclxviii} Repentance of your sins is your change of mind from disbelief to belief that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God with all the implications of it, including the fact that sinfulness cannot be part of your true identity. Additionally, some people would define repentance as being

remorseful over the sins that you have committed,^{ccclxix} and that definition corresponds to the idea of changing your mind. If you are remorseful over your past behavior, then you must now realize that the behavior was not appropriate of you because you now believe again that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God.

The best way to understand atonement is by using the most basic meaning of the Hebrew word which is translated as “make atonement,” and that meaning is “to cover” or to “cover over.”^{ccclxx} The idea of covering your sin has its root in Near Eastern culture. As I have already described, a Near Eastern man defines himself externally by how other people in his community treat him, which manifests what they think of him.^{ccclxxi} Furthermore, as I have also previously described, in Near Eastern culture, honor/dishonor in the judgment of people is equated to honor/dishonor in the judgment of God.^{ccclxxii} Given those cultural circumstances, it is not hard to understand that Near Easterners strive to conceal – or metaphorically “cover” – their sins from public consideration of them by either hiding^{ccclxxiii} those sins from public discovery or by making excuses^{ccclxxiv} for those sins if they are discovered by the public. They know that the public will judge them for their sins, and they want to avoid that outcome, especially because that public judgment will heavily influence their judgment of not just their empirical identities but their true identity as well.

Moreover, two additional elements of Near Eastern psychology support the use of excuses as a form of atonement. First, as I wrote in the section titled “Humanity: God’s Collective, Revisited,” part of what allows the Near Easterner to believe the reality of his ideal self, despite his behavior and living circumstances that are contrary to that ideal, is his psychology, which considers verbal expression – spoken or written – of an ideal to give that ideal a significant degree of reality.^{ccclxxv,ccclxxvi,ccclxxvii,ccclxxviii} Making an excuse for one’s sin is a form of verbally asserting one’s ideal self despite having behaved contrary to it. Second, the Near Eastern belief in divine fatalism, and fatalism in general, provides another basis for making excuses because the Near Easterner believes himself to be subject to forces over which he has no control, including the will of God, the machinations of the devil, and earthly forces.^{ccclxxix,ccclxxx} Thus, excuses that the modern Westerner considers to be invalid, such as “I did not know” or “I could not help it,” are to the Near Easterner perfectly valid because the excuse distances the man – i.e. his concept of his ideal self – from the sin he committed which does not accurately express his ideal self.

Ideally, to the Near Eastern minds of the transgressor and his fellow collective members, the excuse gives sufficient cause for why the transgression should not be attributed to the true identity – i.e. the ideal self – of the transgressor. From a Near Eastern point of view, verbal repentance unto belief in the concept of one’s ideal self gives psychological reality to that ideal self. In the case of Christian repentance, that ideal self is humanity’s permanent true identity as God’s perfect image and likeness, in which there is no sinfulness. Thus, from the Near Eastern perspective, verbal disavowal of your sin gives spiritual reality to the fact that your true identity has no sinfulness in it

and thus validates your belief that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God.

From the Near Eastern and Biblical perspectives, atonement is simply disavowing your sin – i.e. distancing and disassociating your true identity from the sinfulness that you erroneously believed your true identity to have when you committed the sin. This idea of atonement can seem disingenuous and superficial to the Westerner. However, remember that any sin you commit is motivated by and expresses your belief in the falsehood that your true identity is not permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and thus not permanently perfectly righteous. Therefore, sin does not accurately express your true identity nor change it. Accordingly, atonement should be easy, and there is no reason for you to not atone for your sin by disavowing it when you no longer believe that falsehood. Of course, we are still responsible for our behavior. We should seek to correct any harm we have done to others and sincerely commit to changing our behavior in the future. Those things certainly qualify as acts of atonement because they express your belief that the sin you committed was not appropriate of you because your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God.

However, your success or failure in rectifying those harms and changing your future behavior does not affect your true identity in God nor the validity of your atonement for the sin in question because atonement is really just a sensory manifestation – i.e. in word or deed – of a spirit of repentance. When you committed the sin, you had a spirit of deception in which you believed that your true identity was unlike God, and thus not righteous, and that committing the sin was the means to make your true identity the perfect image and likeness of God, and thus perfectly righteous.^{ccclxxxi} In repentance, you now have changed your mind and have a spirit of belief that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, and thus permanently perfectly righteous, and that your sin thus does not accurately express your true identity nor change it. Having that spirit of repentance unto belief in the covenant truth and its implications, you then say or do something to disavow your sin, or put another way, you atone for your sin.

We see an example of repentant excuse-making in Exodus 32:24. After Moses asks Aaron why he made the golden calf idol, Aaron's excuse is that he simply took a collection of gold from the people "*threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.*" It is a ridiculous excuse, as if the gold just came out of the fire on its own formed into the shape of a calf, but the credibility of the excuse does not matter. Aaron's disavowal of the sin is what matters because it expresses his repentance unto belief in his permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God. Aaron's excuse shows that he now believes that making the idol was unbefitting of him because of his true identity in God. Because the excuse manifests Aaron's genuine repentance, Moses does not challenge the plausibility of the excuse.

Of course, this excuse-making is most effective at preserving the offender's belief in his permanent perfect righteousness of true identity as the permanent perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity when the community accepts the excuse and continues to treat him as being part of their collective in God. That is, the sinner's repentance is most effective in his self-perspective when the community members manifest God's forgiveness for him by forgiving him themselves.

Accordingly, Moses accepts the excuse from Aaron in Exodus 32, forgives him, and in so doing, manifests God's forgiveness of Aaron's sin. Moses is motivated by his belief in the preexisting and permanent covenant truth and his recognition of Aaron's repentance unto belief in it.

Atonement is a tool of repentance in that it is sensory behavior meant to help **you** express, maintain, and amplify your repentance – i.e. your belief that despite the sins you have committed, your true identity is innately and permanently the perfect image and likeness of God with all of its implications. In that spirit, you also believe and accept that God has forgiven your sins because you know that He knows that sinfulness is never part of your preexisting and permanent true identity as His perfect image and likeness.^{ccclxxii} You know that He knows that your sins do not accurately express your true identity nor change it, and you agree with His perspective. It is only yourself that you need to convince about your true identity in God. In effect, the actual "covering" that you are doing in atonement is concealing your sins from affecting your perspective or judgment of yourself, which is to say your perspective of what God thinks about you. Most certainly though, you do not need to convince God of your true identity because He is the One Who gave it to you and never doubts that you still have it nor that its implications still apply to you. Accordingly, even if you could, you do not need to conceal your sins from God. God has already forgiven your sins and, in effect, hides them from Himself. As God is recorded to say in Isaiah 43:25, "*I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake; and I will not remember your sins.*"

Indeed, attempting to conceal your sins from God and making excuses to God for your sins actually express a lack of repentance because doing so implies your belief that God does or would judge your true identity to be unlike Him. For example, in the Genesis chapter 3 story, Adam and Eve *cover* themselves with garments after sinning, which seems to be a metaphor for their atonement. Also, Eve makes an excuse to God for her sin by saying "*The serpent deceived me, and I ate.*"^{ccclxxiii} Why, then, does God not allow them to remain in the Garden of Eden? The answer is that they have not actually repented unto belief in the covenant truth and its implications. They do not believe again that their true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and that they are thus permanently perfectly righteous in their true identity. They wear garments, hide from God, and express fear of God because they believe that He judges them to be unlike Himself and thus sinful in their true identity. If they had a spirit of repentance unto belief in the covenant truth, then they would have known and accepted God's preexisting forgiveness of their sin, made no excuses for their sin, and remained in a state of bold nakedness. Their lack of excuse-making and their continuing nakedness would symbolize a lack of shame because they are

certain that their true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, that their true identity is thus permanently perfectly righteous, that their sin thus does not accurately express their true identity nor change it, and that God thus has forgiven their sins.

Now, let's bring this description of repentance and atonement back to the concept of forgiveness. Atonement is an expression of repentance, which is a change of your mind – i.e. your spirit – unto belief that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God with all the implications of it. Within this repentance is your belief in and acceptance of God's forgiveness, for how can you believe that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, and thus permanently perfectly honorable in His judgment, and not simultaneously believe that God has forgiven your sins which inaccurately portray your true identity to be unlike God and dishonorable in His judgment? Repentance and atonement are meant to lead you to believe and accept God's preexisting forgiveness of every sin that you have ever or will ever commit. Since God forgave all your sins from the very beginning – i.e. at Creation – your belief in and acceptance of that forgiveness is the only remaining ingredient needed to make that forgiveness effective in your spirit. Believing your true identity to permanently be the perfect image and likeness of God is the only way to fully and securely believe that God has forgiven all your sins. Because we best learn and believe our true identity in God through faith in Jesus Christ, Christian faith is the best means of believing in God's forgiveness of all sins.

Finally, the reason that many people are resistant to repenting of and atoning for their sins is that they believe that one must have an attitude of guilt and shame about oneself in order to properly repent and atone. Repentance and atonement often have the connotation of admitting flaws in and about yourself and thus being humiliated. However, that is an incorrect perspective because, quite to the contrary, repentance and atonement are about remembering that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and that you are permanently perfectly righteous in your true identity as a result. Accordingly, how can there be any humiliation, guilt, or shame in repentance and atonement? Yes, you were deceived by evil into committing a sin, but much more importantly, you have now defeated and escaped that deception. Therefore, in repentance and atonement, you should feel glorious in your victory over evil and in the persistence of your true identity in God and the righteousness of it.

Unwitting vs. High-Handed Sins

The Old Testament describes the topic of disavowing your sin in The Book of Numbers chapter 15. The chapter makes a distinction between “unwitting” sin and “high-handed” sin. An “unwitting” sin is a sin for which the sinner expresses repentance and seeks and accepts forgiveness. Remember that from the very beginning, God forgave all the sins that all human beings would ever

commit, so the only variable is whether or not a sinner discerns the need for God's forgiveness, believes that forgiveness to be present, and accepts it.

To the modern Western mind, the classification of "unwitting" would seem to only apply to transgressions of God's will that are committed by accident. However, recall that Near Easterners often hide their sins or make excuses for their sins by claiming absence of awareness, intention, or ability to prevent. Therefore, the Biblical implication is that every sin that is repented of is unwitting because it will be concealed or excuses will be given for it.^{ccclxxxiv} Put another way, the repentant sinner will treat his sin as being an inaccurate representation of his true identity, so his perspective will be that his sin must have been the product of deception from evil and thus unwitting.

"High-handed" sins are those for which the sinner does not express repentance. To the contrary, he is proud of his sin, which is why the sin is called "high-handed." The term creates the imagery of doing something wrong without any attempt to conceal it, during or after the fact, as if done with a hand held high-up for all to see.^{ccclxxxv} Remember that all sin is motivated by the false beliefs that your true identity is unlike God, and thus not righteous, and that by sinning, you can make your true identity the perfect image and likeness of God, and thus perfectly righteous. The high-handed sinner is a man who has sinned as a result of those false beliefs but has not subsequently repented unto belief in the covenant truth and its implications. In other words, this man still believes the deception from evil that the true identity of all humanity is unlike God and that perfect likeness to God in one's true identity can be acquired through sinful behavior. Hence, he is proud of his sin.

While God has already forgiven all the sins that humanity will ever commit, the sin of the high-handed sinner is not forgiven only in the sense that he does not seek or accept God's forgiveness for it. God already forgave him, but he does not seek or accept that forgiveness because he does not believe that he has actually behaved inappropriately, despite the fact that his behavior is prohibited by God's Law. Therefore, in his stubborn unwillingness to repent, the high-handed sinner continuously "*blasphemes Yahweh [...and] despise[s] Yahweh's word.*"^{ccclxxxvi}

The distinction between the two types of sin and the idea of excuse-making are alluded to in the narrative of Numbers 15:32-36. A man is caught gathering sticks on the Sabbath day, when all Israelites are meant to be resting. The people bring the man to Moses and Aaron for judgment, and they put him in custody while they discern from Yahweh the appropriate course of action. Why the delay in pronouncing judgment when the command against work on the Sabbath day (and the punishment for it) was clear?^{ccclxxxvii} Because, Moses and Aaron are giving the man the time – i.e. the opportunity – to express repentance for his sin. They are waiting for the man to make some excuse for his sin to show that he again believes his true identity to permanently be the perfect

image and likeness of God, with all of its implications, and so disassociates his true identity from the sinfulness that he believed about his true identity when he committed the sin. Keep in mind, the excuse does not have to be compelling or even plausible. It could be as simple as “I did not know it was the Sabbath day.” Even if that statement is a lie, it still qualifies as atonement because it still expresses the fact that the man **now** does not believe that his sin was appropriate behavior for him because he **now** believes again that his true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. In other words, even a ridiculous excuse for his sin would qualify as atonement because the act of making the excuse expresses repentance unto belief in the covenant truth and its implications.

In summary, Moses and Aaron are doing everything they can to give this man the opportunity for easy repentance of his sin because Moses and Aaron both know that the true identity of every human being is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and thus permanently perfectly righteous. They know that God already forgave him, and they are waiting for him to express desire for, belief in, and acceptance of that forgiveness. If the man had atoned for his sin with such an excuse, Moses and Aaron would have forgiven him as an expression of God’s forgiveness of him. However, the man obstinately refuses to so atone, and the congregation kills him in accordance with the commands of Exodus 35:2: *“Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be a holy day for you, a Sabbath of solemn rest to Yahweh: whoever does any work in it shall be put to death.”*

God Provides the Means of Atonement

The Bible describes multiple means of atonement, which is really to say that God provides the means of atonement, and He does so because He wants us to know and believe that He does forgive our sins as a result of our permanent true identity as His perfect image and likeness. I will detail the means of atonement, but first I would like to point out that the very fact that God provides means of atonement indicates that God must already agree with the spirit that motivates that atonement. In other words, we atone for our sins because we have changed our minds – i.e. we have repented – unto the belief that our true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and thus permanently perfectly righteous, along with all the other implications of that true identity. God would not provide the means of atonement if He did not already and still, despite our sins, believe that true identity and its implications to be ours. Furthermore, if God already knows and believes our true identity to permanently be His perfect image and likeness, and thus permanently perfectly righteous, then He must already forgive our sins for our true identity. After all, how can God hold against your true identity behavior that expresses your **erroneous** belief that your true identity is sinful – i.e. unlike God and dishonorable in His judgment – if He does not share that erroneous belief about your true identity? Put another way, believing a person to be

permanently perfectly righteous necessitates your prior forgiveness of his sins because permanent perfect righteousness is the opposite of sinfulness.

As for the means of atonement provided for in the Bible, the greatest means is Jesus, Himself, but I will discuss Jesus in chapter 7 of this book. The primary means of atonement in the Old Testament is sacrifice. The Law of God prescribes animal sacrifices to be made in the Tabernacle or Temple after a person commits a sin. The procedure for the ritual of sacrifice highlights the repentance expressed in the ritual. Before slaughtering the animal, the offeror – i.e. the man who sinned – lays his hand on the head of the animal.^{ccclxxxviii} “This meant transmission and delegation, and implied representation; so that it really pointed to the substitution of the sacrifice for the sacrificer.”^{ccclxxxix} By laying his hand on the animal to be sacrificed, the offeror symbolically transmits the sin that he committed to the animal. The animal is then slain, its blood is sprinkled upon the altar, and some or all of the animal’s parts are burned upon the altar.

The sacrifice ritual contains important symbolism of repentance. After the man lays his hand upon the animal’s head, the animal is now symbolically laden with sins that are not its own. The implication is that the sins are not accurate expressions of the animal’s nature; they are upon it but did not originate from it. The symbolic implication is that the offeror bears the sins that he has committed, but those sins do not accurately express his true identity. Put another way, his former erroneous belief in the sinfulness of his true identity, which motivated him to sin, was not accurate. Nevertheless, even bearing this sin, the animal is still acceptable upon God’s altar, which implies that God does not hold the sins against the animal, just as God does not hold our sins against our true identity. That is, while the offeror believed when he sinned that his true identity was sinful, God did not then nor does not now agree with that belief. Despite the fact that we commit sins, we, like the animal laden with the offeror’s sin, are still acceptable to God, and even favored by Him, because He knows that our true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness and thus permanently perfectly righteous. God knows that sin does not accurately express our true identity nor change it.

The offeror is meant to identify himself with the animal. The animal is to be one “*without defect*,”^{cccxci} meaning it has no visible abnormalities, and the offeror is meant to understand that the animal’s perfection symbolizes the offeror’s perfectly righteous true identity as God’s perfect image and likeness. Despite the offeror’s sins being transmitted to the animal, the animal is still acceptable to God – i.e. still “*without defect*” – and the offeror is meant to interpret from that symbolism that despite his sins, he is still acceptable to God – i.e. his true identity is still perfectly righteous because it is still the perfect image and likeness of God. Put another way, he is meant to interpret that his sins do not accurately express his true identity nor change it. The sins are rather the product of the deception of the offeror’s spirit by evil. Our sins are metaphorically upon us but not intrinsically part of us. Indeed, the fact that the ritual allows for the symbolic transmission of

sins from the offeror to the animal means that the sins cannot be intrinsically part of us, for if they are, then how can we transfer them to the animal? This concept of sin being with or upon you but not fundamentally part of you, and thus being easily removable, is also expressed in the sacrament of Baptism, which I will describe in the section titled “Baptism.”

Therefore, we can understand how the sacrifice rituals are means of atonement because by engaging in the rituals, a man expresses, maintains, and amplifies his belief that his true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and that, as a result, he is permanently perfectly righteous in his true identity and forgiven of his sins by God in his true identity. However, as I will describe in chapter 7 of this book, Jesus is the perfect sacrifice, once for all sins, so the sacrifices that are detailed in the Old Testament are no longer required. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that God’s forgiveness of all sins is expressed and manifested not only in the New Testament but in the Old Testament as well.

Also, keep in mind that the reciprocation of honor is present in these sacrifices. Namely, an offeror makes a sacrifice as an expression of belief in his permanent true identity in God, the righteousness of it, and God’s preexisting and permanent forgiveness of his sins, and he desires to receive sensory validation of those beliefs. Therefore, in performing the sacrifice, the offeror honors God by identifying with Him and demonstrating the great value that he places upon God’s judgment of him, and God reciprocates by honoring the man with a sensory expression of His judgment of him. That sensory expression is the sacrifice ritual that God commands in His Law, and it symbolizes God’s forgiveness of the man’s sins because despite his sins, he is permanently perfectly righteous in his true identity that is permanently God’s perfect image and likeness. You could even interpret the sacrifice ritual as reciprocal honor in the form of reciprocal generosity so long as you understand that it is reciprocation that occurs in a permanent relationship of shared collective identity between humanity and God.

Sacrifices in Detail

The atonement nature of animal sacrifices is described in the previous section, but it is instructive to examine the different categories of Old Testament sacrifices to better understand how they express, maintain, and amplify belief in the covenant truth and its implications – that is, the belief which is repentance. However, I humbly admit that this section is not an exhaustive account of every detail of every type of sacrifice as they are described in the Old Testament nor as they were actually practiced in the Tabernacle and the Temple.^{ccxcii}

Burnt Offerings, Sin Offerings, and Trespass Offerings

cccxii

Leviticus 1:3-9

“If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without defect. He shall offer it at the door of the Tent of Meeting, that he may be accepted before Yahweh. He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. He shall kill the bull before Yahweh. Aaron’s sons, the priests, shall present the blood and sprinkle the blood around on the altar that is at the door of the Tent of Meeting. He shall skin the burnt offering and cut it into pieces. The sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar, and lay wood in order on the fire; and Aaron’s sons, the priests, shall lay the pieces, the head, and the fat in order on the wood that is on the fire which is on the altar; but he shall wash its innards and its legs with water. The priest shall burn all of it on the altar, for a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, of a pleasant aroma to Yahweh.

In this passage, Moses describes the “*burnt offering*,” which is also known as the “whole burnt offering” because in this type of sacrifice, virtually the entirety of the animal is burned upon the altar of God.

Leviticus 1:4 specifies that burnt offerings are for the purpose of the atonement of the offeror, but we may rightly ask why this category of atonement sacrifice exists when there is also a category of atonement sacrifice called “sin” offerings or “trespass” offerings. The difference between the two categories has two dimensions. Explicitly, the difference is that burnt offerings are virtually entirely consumed on the altar whereas sin offerings and trespass offerings are only partially consumed upon the altar with a significant portion of the animal being given to the priests for their personal consumption.^{ccxciii} In that explicit difference, though, lies an implicit difference as well. Namely, in the sin offerings and trespass offerings, there is a greater perception by the offeror of benefiting from the holiness of the priests than there is in the burnt offerings.

In Near Eastern culture, men who are considered to be holy men of God are believed to be able to convey God’s blessings to people.^{ccxciv} In ancient Israel, the priests are considered to be such holy men of God. To be fair, the sacrifices are formally considered to be offerings from the offeror to God, and the priests’ portion of the sacrifices is formally considered to be the provision of God to them.^{ccxcv} However, in the mind of the offeror, there would still be a connotation of a reciprocation of honor between himself and the priests in a sin offering or a trespass offering. Namely, the offeror implicitly honors the priests with a significant portion of his sacrifice, and the priests implicitly honor the offeror by using their holiness to extend God’s forgiveness to the offeror.

Contrariwise, in the burnt offering, there is much less connotation of the offeror benefiting from the priests' holiness because the only portion of the sacrifice that is given to the priests is the animal's skin.^{ccxcvi} Therefore, in the burnt offering, the offeror must rely much more upon pure faith in God's covenant truth and its implications in order to believe in God's forgiveness of his sins.

Of course, God's forgiveness is not actually gained through intermediaries, and as Christians, we know that the best way to believe in God's forgiveness of your sins is through strong, direct, and individual faith in the covenant truth and its implications – i.e. through faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, we would expect that burnt offerings would be the sacrifices that the Law of God requires Israelites to perform when they atone for their sins, yet the opposite is true. Sin offerings and trespass offerings are required for the atonement of sins, and individual burnt offerings are optional. Some would argue that the reason for this prescription is to ensure that the priests receive sufficient compensation for their work, for if all of the sacrifices are burnt offerings, then the priests will receive little. However, if the priests' compensation is the concern, why even have burnt offerings in the Law at all instead of commanding that all atonement sacrifices be sin offerings or trespass offerings?

Rather, there is sound doctrinal logic for this arrangement. Namely, in Biblical times, many of the Israelites are poor, lowly people who are daily forced to humble themselves by virtue of the circumstances of their lives, so they have daily need to perceive their righteousness and, thus, God's forgiveness of their sins solely through faith in Yahweh's covenant truth and its implications. It is a form of compassion to them from God that the atonement sacrifices which are mandatory for them – and that they can afford to make – are those which incorporate the convincing element of benefiting from the holiness of the priests. In making an atonement sacrifice, the offeror expresses his belief that his true identity is permanently perfectly righteous, as the permanent perfect image and likeness of God, and that God has thus forgiven his sins. The sacrifice's incorporation of the concept of holiness as a force that conveys God's forgiveness only fosters those beliefs. Specifically, the idea that the holiness of the priests conveys God's forgiveness to the offeror makes it easier for the offeror to believe in his forgiveness from God, and the more that he believes in that forgiveness, the easier it is for him to believe that his true identity is perfectly righteous because it is the perfect image and likeness of God.

On the other hand, the voluntary, individual burnt offerings are likely made primarily by the wealthy and prestigious Israelites, who can afford to make them, and they are the very people who benefit the most from that kind of sacrifice. Namely, the rich and prestigious people are those who are regularly esteemed to be righteous by the public, so their perspective of their righteousness and, thus, of God's forgiveness of their sins is largely dependent upon their public reputations. Thus, these people best benefit from making burnt offerings because out of all types of offerings, they best emphasize the true source of righteousness and God's forgiveness of sins: Yahweh's covenant

truth and its implications. The burnt offerings are occasions for them to focus upon that true source rather than upon public esteem as the source.

Nevertheless, the Law of God regarding sacrifices does not overlook the need for all people to prioritize faith in the covenant truth and its implications as the best means of perceiving one's righteousness and God's forgiveness of one's sins. Specifically, burnt offerings are commanded to be performed daily, and at other regular intervals as well, in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple.^{ccxcvii} These sacrifices are paid for out of the Tabernacle or Temple treasury and made on behalf of all the Israelites^{ccxcviii} so that they can all benefit spiritually from their performance. All the Israelites – rich and poor – can thus consider themselves to be offerors of these sacrifices, and they can use them as opportunities to remember that the righteousness of all people and God's forgiveness of all sins are ultimately and entirely founded upon the covenant truth and its implications, both of which Yahweh established and upholds.

Sin Offerings versus Trespass Offerings

Two sacrifices that are described in the Law of God are sin offerings and trespass offerings. Some scholars interpret the terms to refer to different categories of sacrifice. However, the two terms actually both refer to the same category of sacrifice.

First, from a strictly textual analysis of the Scripture involved, the descriptions of the division of the animal into portions that go to the altar and portions which are kept by the priests are nearly identical for sin offerings and trespass offerings.^{ccxcix} Second, Leviticus 7:7 even directly states, “as is the sin offering, so is the trespass offering; there is one law for them.” Third, in Leviticus 5:5-6, both terms are used to refer to the same sacrifice.

It shall be, when he is guilty of one of these, he shall confess that in which he has sinned; and he shall bring his trespass offering to Yahweh for his sin which he has sinned: a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement for him concerning his sin.

Moses first describes the guilty man as bringing a trespass offering to Yahweh, but when he describes the kind of animal that can be used, he refers to it as being “for a sin offering.”

Also, on at least one occasion, the Hebrew words or root words for sin offering and trespass offering are used in the same passage to describe the same commanded sacrifice. Namely, Leviticus 4:27-29 states,

If anyone of the common people sins unwittingly, in doing any of the things which Yahweh has commanded not to be done, and is guilty, if his sin which he has sinned is made known to him, then he shall bring for his offering a goat, a female without defect, for his sin which he has sinned. He shall lay his hand on the head of the sin offering, and kill the sin offering in the place of burnt offering.

Note the words I have placed in bold. The Hebrew word for “sins”^{cd} is the root word for the Hebrew word that means “sin offering.”^{cdi} The Hebrew word for “guilty”^{cdii} is the root word for the Hebrew word that means “trespass offering.”^{cdiii} Since the root words for both terms are used in this command about a sin offering, it stands to reason that both terms refer to the same category of sacrifice.

All textual analysis aside, perhaps the best way to justify my assertion about the equivalence between sin offerings and trespass offerings is to examine the logic of such equivalence. In other words, assuming that both terms refer to the same category of sacrifice, why are there two terms for that category? The answer lies in the terms themselves. Namely, the Hebrew word for “sin,” which is the root word for the Hebrew word meaning “sin offering,” has the literal definition of to “miss (a goal or way),”^{cdiv} and the Hebrew word from which is derived the Hebrew word meaning “trespass offering” has the literal definition of “to be guilty.”^{cdv} The psychological connotations of those definitions are very different. When we sin, we behave contrary to our true identity as God’s perfect image and likeness, but that true identity is ours before, during, and after we sin because our true identity never changes. We “miss the goal” in the sense that the goal is to behave in accordance with the true identity that we already have, so in that way, the use of the word “sin” is doctrinally appropriate. However, “the goal” can be misinterpreted to be the transformation of ourselves from being unlike God in our true identity to being the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity through obedience to the Law of God. A sin would thus be misinterpreted to be a failure to achieve that transformation – i.e. a failure to achieve that supposed goal.

That potential misinterpretation is why Moses discerns from Yahweh the need to add elaboration to the concepts of sin and sin offerings, and that elaboration comes in the form of equating sin and sin offerings to guilt – or trespass^{cdvi} – and trespass offerings, respectively. The concept of guilt implies a deviation from a norm, and that is precisely what happens when we sin. Our true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, so our norm is to behave in accordance with that true identity. When we sin, we transgress that norm, but our true identity does not change. Indeed, deviation from a norm – i.e. guilt – can exist only if the norm remains constant as being contrary to the deviation, for otherwise, the deviation would become the norm. Even when we sin,

our norm is still to not sin because our true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. Our sins do not accurately express our true identity nor change it. Hence, the concept of guilt adds needed elaboration to the concept of sin. We are to always behave in accordance with our permanent true identity as Yahweh's perfect image and likeness – that is, such behavior is our norm and our goal – but when we fail to do so, we must not believe that true identity to be corrupted or absent in us. In other words, the elaboration provided by the guilt/trespass terminology makes it clear that our goal is not to make our true identity the perfect image and likeness of God (for we already and permanently have that true identity) but, rather, to behave in accordance with that preexisting and permanent true identity in us.

Meal Offerings

Leviticus 2:13

Every offering of your meal offering you shall season with salt. You shall not allow the salt of the covenant of your God to be lacking from your meal offering. With all your offerings you shall offer salt.

“Meal offerings” can be a confusing term for the modern reader of the Bible simply because we tend to define the word “meal” as being the combined foods that are eaten in one sitting by one person. In the context of the meal offerings, the word “meal” means “the substance of edible grain ground to fine particles.”^{cdvii} In other words, a “meal offering” is an offering of flour, which may or may not be baked into bread, cake, etc. Meal offerings appear in multiple pieces of Pentateuch Scripture, but for the purposes of this description, I will restrict the context to the content of Leviticus chapter 2.

Significantly, meal offerings contain none of the *overt* symbolism of repentance that is found in the animal sacrifices. Indeed, atonement is not mentioned in the Leviticus chapter 2 description of these offerings. However, there is still *subtle* symbolism of preexisting repentance unto belief in the covenant truth and its implications in this sacrifice. Specifically, this symbolism comes in the form of the application of salt to the meal offerings.

In his book, *The Syrian Christ*, Abraham Rihbany writes “*The saying, ‘There is bread and salt between us,’ which has been prevalent in the East from time immemorial, is equal to saying, ‘We are bound together by a solemn covenant.’*”^{cdviii} In the meal offering, there is present literal bread (or its main ingredient, flour) and salt, which symbolize the covenant between Yahweh and humanity.^{cdix} Accordingly, when an Israelite makes a meal offering, he expresses his belief in the

covenant truth that his true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God and his belief in the implications of that true identity. These beliefs are also maintained and amplified by the offeror's perception of benefiting, in multiple ways, from the holiness of the priests since the priests receive a portion of the meal offerings.^{cdx} That perception will maintain and increase the offeror's belief in his favor from/with God, and belief in that favor will support his belief in his true identity in God and the implications of it.

Finally, salt, even by itself, is symbolic of the covenant between Yahweh and humanity,^{cdxi} and Leviticus 2:13 specifies that all sacrifices, meal and otherwise, are to be salted. Furthermore, salt is a symbol of holiness/righteousness,^{cdxii,cdxiii} which is a benefit to humanity that results from the covenant truth. Thus, we can infer that all forms of sacrifice specified in the Torah are symbols of the covenant truth, its implications, and the offeror's belief in both.

Peace Offerings

Leviticus 3:1-5

“If his offering is a sacrifice of peace offerings, if he offers it from the herd, whether male or female, he shall offer it without defect before Yahweh. He shall lay his hand on the head of his offering, and kill it at the door of the Tent of Meeting. Aaron’s sons, the priests, shall sprinkle the blood around on the altar. He shall offer of the sacrifice of peace offerings an offering made by fire to Yahweh. The fat that covers the innards, and all the fat that is on the innards, and the two kidneys, and the fat that is on them, which is by the loins, and the cover on the liver, with the kidneys, he shall take away. Aaron’s sons shall burn it on the altar on the burnt offering, which is on the wood that is on the fire: it is an offering made by fire, of a pleasant aroma to Yahweh.”

Previously, I described the animal sacrifices prescribed in the Bible as a means of atonement provided by God to His people by which they express their repentance unto belief in the covenant truth and its implications, including the fact that God has forgiven their sins because their sins do not accurately express their true identity as His perfect image and likeness nor change it. A peace offering is a type of sacrifice that is meant to be offered not as an expression of new repentance but, rather, as a means of expressing, maintaining, and amplifying one's preexisting repentance unto belief in the covenant truth and its implications. Peace offerings are an expression of one's *enduring* belief in the covenant truth and its implications rather than of one's *renewed* belief in both. Namely, peace offerings are for the purpose of thanking Yahweh for some blessings, fulfilling some vow that the offeror has made to Yahweh, or simply as a free-will expression of faith in Yahweh.^{cdxiv} In other words, they express the offeror's belief that his true identity is

permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God, as the perfect image and likeness of God, and his recognition of the ways in which God has honored him. The details of the ritual itself also honor the offeror as a way of emphasizing his honor in the judgment of God.

I want to highlight the specification that the only portion of the sacrifice that is meant to be fully offered to God – that is, fully consumed by the altar fire or sprinkled upon the altar – is the blood, fat, and some of the organs. This is a very significant detail because while some Near Eastern people would be willing to eat those parts of the animal, the muscle meat is the tasty and nutritious portion of the animal that can feed the most people,^{cdxv} and the muscle meat is consumed by the offeror, his family and guests, and the priests. The division of the muscle meat between the offeror and the priests is specified in Leviticus chapter 7, but regardless of the division, the greater point is that God honors human beings by generously giving them the muscle meat of the animal so that they can all eat their fill of tasty, nutritious food while He only takes the much smaller portion of the animal, which comprises the blood, fat, and some of the organs.

In these peace offerings, God is thus simultaneously portrayed as a gracious host and guest. God is a gracious host because ultimately God is the One Who creates and provides the animal for the man to sacrifice in the first place. Furthermore, it is human beings to whom Yahweh, as Host, offers the largest portion of the animal – i.e. the tasty, nutritious muscle meat – for their satiety. Yahweh thus honors the offeror of the sacrifice just as a Near Eastern host honors his guest. God is also a gracious guest because the offeror makes the peace offering to Him. Significantly, when the offeror places his hand on the head of the sacrifice in the peace offering, it does not symbolize transmission of his sin but, rather, his role as the host providing the figurative food to Yahweh. Any Near Eastern houseguest would be offered ample quantities of the best food that the host can offer,^{cdxvi,cdxvii} but the gracious guest only takes enough to honor the host for his hospitality without depriving the host and his family of an excellent meal as well.^{cdxviii,cdxix,cdxx} Also, a guest eating less than the full amount offered is an honor to the host in the sense that food being left uneaten proves that the guest has been provided with enough food to be fully satisfied.^{cdxxi} Hence, Yahweh figuratively consuming much less than the full animal in the offering conveys honor to the offeror as having provided Him with much more than enough to be fully satisfied. Both implicit roles of God in this sacrifice – as Host and Guest – are excellent metaphors for God and our covenant relationship with Him. Namely, God always blesses and honors us to a greater degree than we can ever reciprocate, just as a Near Eastern father does more for his son than his son can ever do for him.

Also, we must not overlook the great significance of God **commanding** that the offeror consume some of this sacrifice. In Near Eastern culture, a distinguished guest eats alone while his host attends to him and serves him. Only if the guest invites his host to eat with him will he do so,^{cdxxii} and such an invitation implies that the guest considers the host to be his equal. Therefore, God

commanding that the offeror eat some of the sacrifice symbolizes His belief that the offeror is the perfect image and likeness of God in his permanent true identity and thus that his true identity is permanently perfectly honorable in God's judgment, even as honorable as God judges Himself to be. The offeror eating some of the sacrifice symbolizes his belief that he has that true identity and righteousness.

I also remind the reader of the statement from Abraham Rihbany, "*The saying, 'There is bread and salt between us,' which has been prevalent in the East from time immemorial, is equal to saying, 'We are bound together by a solemn covenant.'*"^{cdxxiii} Both salt^{cdxxiv} and bread^{cdxxv} would be present in the consumption of the peace offering, and in the Near East, a shared meal is symbolic of a covenant between the participants.^{cdxxvi,cdxxvii} In other words, the figurative shared meal between Yahweh and the offeror in the peace offering symbolizes the original covenant between Yahweh and humanity and the offeror's belief in it and the implications of it, including his perfect honor in the judgment of God – i.e. his perfect righteousness.^{cdxxviii}

Furthermore, in the peace offering, Yahweh grants the offeror honor in the judgment of people as well because by allowing the offeror to keep some of the muscle meat from the animal, Yahweh enables the offeror to have the honor of hosting a sumptuous feast for his family and any invited guests. Being honorable in their judgment will help the offeror to believe in his honor in the judgment of God – i.e. his righteousness – and thus will help him to believe that his true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God.

Additionally, the concept of holiness as a wonder-working force is present in the peace offering as well. The priests receive a portion of the sacrifice,^{cdxxix,cdxxx} so there is present the connotation of the offeror benefiting, in multiple ways, from the holiness of the priests. Furthermore, the offeror consumes part of the holy sacrifice himself, so there is the further connotation that he gains holiness from doing so. Therefore, the offeror's belief in his favor from/with God will be maintained and amplified. Believing in that favor will make it easier for him to believe in his true identity in God and the implications of it.

Pleasant Aroma to Yahweh

Leviticus 1:9

[...] *The priest shall burn all of it on the altar, for a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, of a pleasant aroma to Yahweh.*

The context of this particular verse is instructions for performing the burnt offering, but the phrase “*pleasant aroma to Yahweh*” is used multiple times in the Pentateuch in connection with sacrifices. The phrase refers to the aroma that permeates the Tabernacle/Temple and its surroundings. Indeed, the animals that are burned on the altar are effectively being cooked, and the cooking of meat creates a very pleasant aroma.

However, the phrase “*pleasant aroma to Yahweh*” is really an externalized reference to the impression created in the minds of the Israelites when they smell the aroma of the sacrifices. Specifically, as rituals of atonement that express repentance unto belief in the covenant truth and its implications, the animal sacrifices symbolize the permanent true identity of all humanity as the perfect image and likeness of God, the permanent perfect righteousness of that true identity, God’s forgiveness of our sins as a result of that true identity, and all the other implications of the covenant truth. Therefore, the scent of these sacrifices inspires in the minds of the Israelites the remembrance of those concepts and amplifies their belief in them.

In other words, the phrase, “*a pleasant aroma to Yahweh*,” is really another way of saying that the aroma will remind the Israelites that they are pleasant to God and favored by God because of their permanent true identity in Him. Given that sacrifices occur in the Tabernacle/Temple on a daily basis,^{cdxxxii} this aroma is regularly present and thus is a daily reminder to the people of the covenant truth and its implications.

Chapter 7: Jesus Christ

Name

The topic of Jesus Christ is, of course, enormous because He is the most prominent human figure in Christianity. I think the best way to begin the explanation of Him is to examine His name. As I described in the section titled “The Name of God,” the Biblical concept of a person’s “name” includes a person’s entire identity, but for the moment, let’s focus upon just the appellation of Jesus – i.e. what He was called during His life on earth and what we call Him today.

Matthew 1:21-23

She shall give birth to a son. You shall name him Jesus, for it is he who shall save his people from their sins.

*Now all this has happened that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying,
“Behold, the virgin shall be with child,
and shall give birth to a son.
They shall call his name Immanuel,”
which is, being interpreted, “God with us.”*

In that passage, the angel from God speaks to Joseph about the child that Mary carries. The angel commands Joseph to name the child “Jesus,” and that name is an English transliteration of a Greek transliteration of a version of the Hebrew name, which is itself transliterated into English as “Joshua.”^{cdxxxii,cdxxxiii} The name Joshua means “Yahweh is salvation,”^{cdxxxiv} so the name “Jesus,” which comes from the name Joshua, is very appropriate for the Messiah because as the Scripture states, it is “*he who shall save his people from their sins.*” Jesus saves people from their sins by teaching them that their permanent true identity is God’s perfect image and likeness and that they are forgiven of their sins by God as a result of that permanently perfectly righteous true identity. Hence, it is Yahweh Who ultimately saves people from sin by establishing and upholding the covenant truth and its implications, and it is Jesus Who saves us only in the sense that He teaches us both.

As the passage specifies, “*Immanuel*” means “*God with us.*” That name also refers to the covenant truth from God and its implications because the fact that our true identity is permanently

God's perfect image and likeness means that we are permanently part of God's collective. As a result, God never forsakes us just as an ideal Near Eastern man would not forsake the members of his family. Indeed, the prophecy to which the Gospel writer refers is Isaiah 7:14, and the context of that prophecy is that God, through the prophet Isaiah, is reassuring Ahaz, the King of Judah, that He will not forsake the Kingdom of Judah as it is threatened by enemies.

God is always with us in the sense that He never forsakes us, and because it is Jesus Who teaches us the covenant truth and its implications – i.e. the reasons why God never forsakes us – it is in His teachings and example that we know that God is always with us. Hence, Jesus is also referred to as “*Immanuel*.” We may ask why the angel did not command that Mary’s child be named Immanuel instead of Jesus. The most likely answer is that giving Him such a name would have provoked claims of blasphemy from the community. After all, “*Immanuel*” is a clear reference to the Messianic prophecy, and people likely would have considered it blasphemous to assume that a newborn baby is the Messiah given that nobody knows what kind of adult that baby will become.

Ultimately, we can understand now that all the names involved in this discussion – Joshua, Jesus, and Immanuel – refer to the same thing: saving people from their sins by educating them about their true identity in God and the implications of it.

Moving on now to the term “Christ,” it is not the last name or family name of Jesus, for ancient Near Easterners did not have surnames in the sense that we understand them in the modern, Western world. Typically, an ancient Near Eastern man would be given a first name, otherwise known as a forename, and that name would be sufficient to identify him within and among his immediate family. If he needed to be referred to in a wider social context, his father’s name would be added to the end of his first name. Thus, within Jesus’ immediate family, He would have been known as simply “Jesus,” but within the larger community, He would have been referred to as “Jesus, son of Joseph” because Joseph was His father. If further clarification was needed, additional lineage could be mentioned, such as “Jesus, son of Joseph, son of Jacob,” and so on.^{cdxxxv} Alternatively, the name of a man’s home village or city could be added to his name to help differentiate him. Hence, Jesus could be referred to as “Jesus of Nazareth” since Nazareth was Jesus’ hometown.

The word “Christ” is a title given to Jesus by virtue of His ministerial role. “Christ” is an English transliteration of the Greek word, which means “anointed” or “anointed one.”^{cdxxxvi} To be anointed refers to being chosen, and in the case of Jesus, it refers more specifically to Jesus being chosen or selected by God. Thus, the more precise rendering of “Jesus Christ” is “Jesus, *the Christ*” or “Jesus, *the Christ of God*.” Alternatively, we can refer to Jesus as “Jesus, *the Messiah*” or “Jesus, *the Messiah of God*” because the word “Messiah” is an English transliteration of a Greek

transliteration of the Hebrew word that also means “anointed.”^{cxxxvii,cxxxviii,cxxxix} In short, the words “Christ” and “Messiah” have the same meaning.

Of course, the natural next question is, if Jesus is anointed by God for a ministerial role, then what is the nature of that role? What is the significance of Jesus as the Christ? The answer to those questions forms the substance of this entire chapter and, really, of this entire book. In short, Jesus’ role as Messiah is to communicate to all people the covenant truth that all humanity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity and all the implications of that true identity. In other words, Jesus – His words, deeds, death, resurrection, ascension, etc. – is not a new covenant in Himself but is rather an expression and manifestation of the original covenant that was established by God in Genesis 1:26-27 and its implications.

However, one very important point is that Jesus did not go about in His ministry often proclaiming Himself to be the Christ or the Messiah, but His infrequent self-identification should not be interpreted as Jesus disbelieving His ministerial role. Jesus does not often self-identify as the Christ or Messiah simply because He wants people to arrive at that conclusion about Him solely based upon their recognition that He best manifests the Spirit of God.^{cdxl} The purpose of Jesus’ ministry is to help people believe in the covenant truth from God and its implications, both of which form the substance of God’s Spirit. Thus, Jesus wants people to believe in that covenant truth and its implications and then believe Him to be the Messiah solely because He best manifests both in His words, deeds, etc.

Furthermore, Jesus even commands His disciples to not tell other people that He is the Christ.^{cdxli} Again, Jesus simply wants to prioritize people’s belief in the covenant truth from God and its implications. If Jesus or His disciples tell people that He is the Christ before teaching and convincing them of the covenant truth and its implications, then one of two undesirable outcomes will result. First, they may reject Him as the Christ because He does not meet their preconceived notions of what the Messiah should be, namely that the Christ should have the esteem of the popular religious scholars of the day, which Jesus certainly does not have. Alternatively, they may believe Him to be the Christ only because His miracles demonstrate God’s confirmation that He is the Messiah. However, that outcome is still undesirable because it lacks context. Specifically, without believing the covenant truth and its implications, both of which apply to all humanity, people will receive the impression that Jesus is better than them in God’s judgment. Such a conclusion contradicts the entire purpose of Jesus’ ministry as the Christ. Surely, Jesus is the Christ, but His intention as the Christ is to convince all people that like Him, they are all perfectly righteous in their permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God. Therefore, Jesus wants people to identify themselves as equals with Him, not inferiors to Him, in the judgment of God.

Finally, we often also refer to Jesus as our “Lord and Savior.” While the divinity of Jesus is real,^{cxxlii} the title of “Lord” for Jesus does not refer to His divinity. Rather, the word “Lord,” while it can refer to God, can also be used as a title of address to a man, in which it simply means “master.”^{cxxliii} In fact, in some verses of the New Testament, it can be difficult to determine whether the word “Lord” refers to Jesus or to God, but the distinction is ultimately not necessary because Jesus manifests the Spirit of Yahweh. For Christians, Jesus is our “Lord” – i.e. our Master – in the sense that it is His teachings that we believe and follow in order to best know and believe the covenant truth from God and its implications, both of which form the substance of God’s Spirit. In other words, while Yahweh is our Lord – i.e. our Master, whose Spirit we follow and believe to be true – Jesus manifests the Spirit of Yahweh, so to call Jesus our “Lord” is to effectively call Yahweh our “Lord.”

Similarly, we refer to Jesus as our “Savior” because we are saved from our corrupted understanding of ourselves by believing Jesus’ teachings. Through Jesus’ words and example, we know and believe that our true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. Therefore, we believe that sinfulness is never part of our true identity and that God thus has forgiven ours sins because they do not accurately express our true identity nor change it. Since God is the One Who established and upholds the covenant truth and its implications, He is our Savior from sin, but because Jesus convinces us of the covenant truth and its implications, we can also say that Jesus is our Savior from sin.

It is important to always remember that our ultimate Lord and Savior is Yahweh, God Almighty. However, referring to Jesus as our Lord and Savior does not contradict that distinction, for Jesus serves as a manifestation of God’s Spirit and Power through His words, deeds, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. To express this harmony between Yahweh and Jesus as both being our Lord and Savior, I often refer to Yahweh in prayer, etc. as “Yahweh *in Jesus’ name*,” for while Yahweh is God’s name, I know and believe in Yahweh best through my knowledge of and faith in the total identity – i.e. the *name* – of Jesus Christ. Similarly, as I will describe in the next section, it is in the name of Jesus Christ that Yahweh knows human beings and that we should know each other because Jesus represents and manifests the permanent true identity of humanity that is the perfect image and likeness of God.

Son of Man and Son of God

In the Gospels, Jesus refers to Himself as “the Son of Man” and “the Son of God.” To understand the meaning of those titles, recall the Near Eastern concept of collective identity, in which a man considers himself to be a member of a collective of people, who all acknowledge some real or

imagined person as being the ideal model of what it means to be part of that collective. The ideal model best embodies the true identity of every member of the collective, and all the members strive to behave in accordance with that true identity.^{cdxliv} Additionally, in the Near East, the word “son” does not just refer to the biological relationship between a man and his male offspring. It can also refer to the two parties in question being part of the same collective and thus sharing a collective identity.^{cdxlv} Namely, those two parties are literally or figuratively the father – i.e. the ideal model of the collective – and the son – i.e. another member of the collective.^{cdlxvi}

A “son of man,” then, refers to somebody who is a member of the collective of men, and in Biblical vocabulary, the word “men” is often used to refer to all people, including men, women, and children.^{cdlxvii} Thus, a “son of man” – including Jesus, the Son of Man – is a member of the collective composed of all people, and all people share a true identity because they are part of the same collective of humanity. Put more simply, a “son of man” is a human being.^{cdlxviii} Similarly, a “son of God” refers to a person who is a member of the collective that is composed of God and all those who share God’s collective identity by having a true identity that is the perfect image and likeness of God.

Significantly, when Jesus refers to Himself with these titles, He uses the article “the.” Furthermore, even though the oldest manuscripts that we have of the Gospels, which are written in ancient Greek, do not differentiate between upper-case and lower-case letters,^{cdlxix} most English translations of the Bible will render Jesus’ titles with capital letters, namely “the Son of Man” and “the Son of God.” These are significant details because they express the fact that Jesus, out of all the human beings in these collectives, is the best manifestation and representation of the collective identity of humanity and the collective identity of God. Jesus is not only *a* son but, also, *the* Son of Man and *the* Son of God. Certainly, God Himself is the ideal model of both the collective of human beings and the collective of God because both are one and the same in true identity. However, *among human beings*, Jesus is the best manifestation and representation of that shared true identity between God and humanity as well as its implications.

The covenant truth about the true identity that is shared between God and humanity is expressed in the very fact that Jesus calls Himself both the Son of Man and the Son of God because if He is both, then we can conclude that the Son of Man **is** the Son of God. The further implication is that **a** son of man must also be **a** son of God. As previously described, among human beings, Jesus is the best manifestation and representation of the collective identity of humanity and the collective identity of God. Therefore, all members of the collective of humanity – that is, all sons of man – must also be part of the collective of God – that is, sons of God. Is that a bold statement? Well, it is no bolder than the original covenant truth delivered in Genesis 1:26-27, in which God proclaims that man shall be made in His image and likeness. The true identity of humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God – i.e. children of God. This is the covenant truth that Jesus came to

teach us. More accurately, Jesus came to remind us of that preexisting and permanent covenant truth and all of its implications. That is the ministerial role – i.e. the Messiahship – for which He was anointed by God. Jesus' teachings in the Gospels are not a new invention but rather a reminder of what has always been true from the very beginning.

Additionally, we must realize that however attractive and comforting the loving words and deeds of Jesus are to His followers, what gives Jesus authority in their judgment is the clear evidence that He is loved, blessed, and anointed by God. This clear evidence includes Jesus' ability to work miracles, which are possible only by the power of God, Jesus' ability to defeat in debate the prominent religious scholars of the day, Jesus' resurrection by God, and His ascension to Heaven. These are all signs that Jesus is definitely a genuine, "God-approved" Holy Man; these are all signs that Jesus surely is the Son of God.

Nevertheless, the real comfort to Jesus' followers is that this undeniable Holy Man and Son of God is clearly, visibly a human being, that He chooses to emphasize His humanity by calling Himself the Son of Man, and that He chooses to associate with and work miracles for even the lowliest people in society. In other words, Jesus makes it clear, from the very beginning of His ministry, that He identifies with all people and that all people are meant to identify with Him. By implication, if all sons of man are meant to identify themselves with the Son of Man, Who is also undeniably the Son of God, then all sons of man must also be sons of God. That is, all human beings must be the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity and perfectly righteous in our true identity as a result. Therefore, all sons of man must also be just as favored by God as is Jesus, the Son of Man and the Son of God.

Significantly, the number of instances in the Gospels in which Jesus refers to Himself as the Son of God are much fewer than the number of instances in which He refers to Himself as the Son of Man. This discrepancy is the direct result of Jesus prioritizing the goal of leading people to identify themselves with Him and thus to transitively and inferentially identify themselves as sons of God as well. It is relatively easy to get people to identify Jesus as the Son of God because Jesus' miracles, resurrection, and ascension validate Him as being such, but the real challenge is getting people to identify themselves with Jesus, as the Son of God, and thus with God. By emphasizing that He is the Son of Man, Jesus reminds people that He is a human being just like them. Jesus' intention is to communicate to people His belief, and by extension the belief of His Father Whom He represents, that He is no different from them, so they should consider themselves to be sons of God just as much as they consider Him to be the Son of God.

For the same reason, there are instances in which Jesus forbids publicity for His miracles.^{ccl} For instance, Mark 1:40-44:

A leper came to him, begging him, kneeling down to him, and saying to him, “If you want to, you can make me clean.”

Being moved with compassion, he stretched out his hand, and touched him, and said to him, “I want to. Be made clean.” When he had said this, immediately the leprosy departed from him and he was made clean. He strictly warned him and immediately sent him out, and said to him, “See that you say nothing to anybody, but go show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing the things which Moses commanded, for a testimony to them.”

Jesus orders the recipient of the miracle to not tell anybody that He worked the miracle but, rather, to follow the prescription in the Law of God for being declared clean of leprosy, which includes showing oneself to a priest.^{cdli} In other words, Jesus wants the public to know that a miracle was worked for this man but not by Him because Jesus does not want people to consider God's demonstration of love and esteem for that man to be only a byproduct of God's love and esteem for Jesus. Jesus seeks to limit His publicity in these miracles so that people will see the recipient of the miracle and deem the miracle to be the product of God's **direct** love and esteem for the recipient. Hopefully, that conclusion will cause the people to know and believe God's same direct love and esteem for them. Put another way, hopefully the miracle will serve as "*a testimony to them*" that God directly loves and esteems all people and so will lead them to believe that they are all sons of God – i.e. the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity.

To be clear, Jesus' representation and manifestation of the covenant truth and its implications is not limited to Him simply calling Himself the Son of Man and the Son of God. He also expresses that covenant truth and its implications in His teachings and in His behavior. He treats all people according to their true identity as God's perfect image and likeness. Put another way, Jesus treats every son of man as being a son of God. Jesus declares forgiveness of sins because He knows that sinfulness is never part of humanity's permanent true identity, sin thus does not accurately express our true identity nor change it, and God has forgiven our sins for those reasons. Jesus consistently validates the righteousness of the lowly people because He knows that all people are permanently perfectly righteous in their permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God, despite any sins that they have committed or their public reputation for sinfulness. Put another way, Jesus knows that all people are permanently sons of God and treats them accordingly. Jesus loves all people because He knows that all people have the same permanent true identity in God that He has, and Jesus knows that God loves all people because we all have that permanent true identity that is God's perfect image and likeness.

Of course, some people will point out that Jesus is very critical of the Pharisees, but His criticism of them is that their pursuit of righteousness through public opinion, generated by their

conspicuous legal compliance, does not result in them having any comforting and assured sense of their righteousness. Furthermore, their example leads others to the same corrupted spirit. We see this criticism expressed in Matthew 23:14, in which Jesus says “*But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you shut up the Kingdom of Heaven against men; for you don’t enter in yourselves, neither do you allow those who are entering in to enter.*” In that verse, the hypocrisy of which Jesus accuses them is that they desire peace of mind about their righteousness but pursue it, and recommend others to pursue it, in a way that yields only a shallow and transitory perception of righteousness. Any righteousness that they perceive about themselves brings them no peace of mind simply because their perception of it is based upon fickle public opinion rather than upon the unchanging perspective of God that humanity’s true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness. They present themselves as experts and guides on how to be righteous, but they actually lead themselves and others away from being confident about their righteousness.

However, Matthew 23:14 shows that no matter how much Jesus is angered by the Pharisees’ perspective and methods, He knows that they, too, are victims of deception. They pursue a reliable righteousness that they will never find so long as they seek it in public opinion. This is why Jesus says in reference to the scribes and Pharisees, “*woe to you*” rather than “*curses upon you.*” The former statement has the same significance as the modern phrase, “I feel sorry for you.” It expresses criticism of the object of the phrase but with the implication that the object brings hardship upon himself through his behavior.^{cdlii} Ultimately, the scribes and Pharisees are objects of Jesus’ pity rather than His contempt, for they are victims of their own deceived spirits just as much as those who follow them.

Finally, I would like to add some additional context to the fact that Jesus uses the article “the” when He refers to Himself as “the Son of Man” and “the Son of God.” Another reason for that choice is that He is **the only** person who knows and sincerely believes the covenant truth about the shared collective identity of humanity and God and its implications. This is also why Jesus refers to Himself as “*the only born Son of God,*”^{cdliii} for He is referring to being born of the Spirit of God, which is a metaphor for believing that which God believes – i.e. making God’s Spirit your own spirit. Thus, Jesus is “*the only born Son of God*” in the sense that He is the only person, at the time, who sincerely believes the covenant truth and its implications, both of which God believes.^{cdliv} Of course, “*the only*” is a bit of classic Near Eastern exaggeration, for John the Baptist surely knows and believes the covenant truth and its implications as well since he supports and praises Jesus.^{cdlv} However, Jesus’ point is that He is one of the few people at the time who know and believe the covenant truth and its implications.

This is not to say that Jesus is Messiah simply “by default” because He is the first person of His time willing to believe the covenant truth and its implications. Most certainly, God chose Jesus specifically for this role, but we also cannot underestimate the importance of Jesus’ boldness and

humility in belief. A significant part of Jesus' qualification to be Messiah is that He is willing to believe the covenant truth and its implications, both of which He discerns from God, and such belief does necessitate boldness. We see throughout the Gospels how unpopular the covenant truth and its implications are among the prominent religious scholars in society, and Jesus is even put to death for his teachings about both. Additionally, Jesus is a lowly person in society, which means that He is considered to be sinful by the prominent religious scholars. It is difficult to believe the covenant truth and its implications when the prominent religious scholars, and many other people, do not treat you as being righteous. It thus takes great boldness for Jesus to believe that the covenant truth and its implications apply to Him, but it also takes great humility for Him to believe that they apply to everybody else as well. Jesus' experience in lowliness gives Him that needed humility.

Daniel 7:13-14

"I saw in the night visions, and behold, there came with the clouds of the sky one like a son of man, and he came even to the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before him. Dominion was given him, and glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which will not pass away, and his kingdom one that will not be destroyed."

Some people might argue that the term “son of man” is simply a reference to Daniel 7:13-14, which describes the prophet Daniel having a dream or vision of the future Messiah. They would argue that the term refers only to the future Messiah with no additional meaning related to the rest of humanity. While I agree that the passage refers to the future Messiah, it does not make the term “son of man” a *unique* description for the future Messiah. As I wrote in the previous section, “son of man” is simply a Near Eastern expression that means “human being.” All that Daniel is saying in this passage is that the Messiah he saw in his dream or vision looked like a human being.

The reason that Daniel makes this observation and the reason that he says that the future Messiah was only “like” a son of man is because just prior to seeing the Messiah, Daniel saw ferocious beasts that are unlike anything he has seen before, such as a leopard with the wings of a bird.^{cdlvi} These sights are so fantastic that Daniel cannot be sure of what he is seeing, so when he sees the Messiah in the form of a man, he is not willing to definitively identify Him as a human being. Instead, Daniel refers to Him as being “like” a son of man – that is, like a human being.

Intercessor

As Christians, we say that Jesus is our intercessor with God.^{cdlvii} This statement is really just another way of referencing the fact that Jesus perfectly manifests and represents the covenant truth or, put another way, that Jesus is the Son of Man and the Son of God. The supposed “conflict” between God and man that needs intercession is only man’s deceived perspective of himself that he is not like God in his true identity. Jesus intercedes in this conflict not by changing anything in God’s perspective but, rather, only by leading man to believe that his true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and that because of that permanent true identity, God permanently loves him, permanently judges him to be perfectly honorable in his true identity, and has forgiven his sins.

Divinity

One of the principle tenets of Christian doctrine is that Jesus is God, but that statement causes much confusion and controversy because as modern Western people, we tend to think in terms of individuality. When we hear the assertion that “Jesus is God,” we are inclined to think that the meaning is that Jesus is God *alone* – that is, that Jesus is the single embodiment of the totality of Yahweh. This causes a logical problem for us because Jesus clearly is a human being. Aside from the description of Jesus’ normal human characteristics, such as having been born of a woman, John 5:27 directly specifies that Jesus is a son of man. Furthermore, if Jesus was born in the first century A.D., Who was the God of the Old Testament? How could God exist from the beginning of time if Jesus was not born yet? Western Christianity creates many complex explanations to try to resolve these logical inconsistencies, but the reality is much simpler.

The covenant truth is that all human beings have the true identity that is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and thus equally as righteous as is God. Therefore, Jesus and every other human being **is** God in the sense that we are all part of the collective of God and thus share His collective identity as our true identity. This statement would anger many modern Western Christians because they are tempted to judge it to be blasphemous. However, the divinity of humanity cannot be blasphemous because it is really just another way of expressing the covenant truth that God Himself declared in Genesis 1:26-27. Furthermore, there is no denial or belittlement of Yahweh in the concept of humanity’s divinity because humanity’s divinity is founded entirely upon our true identity that is **in** Yahweh and **from** Yahweh.

We are not gods in and of ourselves or independent from Yahweh. Psalm 82:6 puts it best: “*You are gods, all of you are sons of the Most High.*” By definition, as sons of God, we must be gods

ourselves because we are members of Yahweh's collective and thus share His collective identity. However, we are only gods because we are part of His collective – that is, because we are His sons and thus His perfect image and likeness in our true identity. Furthermore, Yahweh is no less God because any one person chooses to reject Him, as if Yahweh loses some aspect of Himself in that rejection. Indeed, the Near Eastern concept of collective identity is not that it is a sum of parts but, rather, an ideal identity that is fully within each member of the collective.^{cldviii} In God's collective, we share His collective identity as our true identity, but apart from God, our true identity is nothing. In fact, Genesis 1:26-27, in stating what our true identity is, also implies that there is nothing more to our true identity than that collective identity of God.

Evangelization

While Jesus is **the** Messiah and **the** Christ, every human being is **a** messiah and **a** christ. Remember, the words “messiah” and “christ” mean “anointed,” and Jesus is anointed by God to communicate the covenant truth and its implications to humanity.^{cldix} However, every human being is called by God to be a Christian, and every Christian is meant to communicate the covenant truth and its implications to other people as well. How do we know this is true? We only need to look to the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I commanded you. Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Yes, Jesus says these words to the eleven remaining apostles, but who are the apostles other than simply people who choose to believe the teachings of Jesus Christ? As Jesus believes and expresses the covenant truth and its implications, so too should you, as a believer in both, express them. You may not express them as well and as consistently as Jesus does, but every little bit helps in leading other people to know and believe the covenant truth and its implications.

Consider also Matthew 16:13-19:

Now when Jesus came into the parts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?”

They said, “Some say John the Baptizer, some, Elijah, and others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. I also tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my assembly, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give to you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven; and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.”

Jesus says that He will build His assembly – i.e. His group of followers – upon the efforts of Peter. He says those words to Peter because he professes faith in Him as being both “*the Son of Man*” and “*the Christ, the Son of the living God.*” In his faith in Jesus, Peter understands and believes that all humanity has the permanent true identity that is the perfect image and likeness of God. In other words, Peter professes his belief in the covenant truth and its implications. Jesus says to Peter, “*flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.*” That is, Peter believes that Jesus is the Messiah because he believes that the covenant truth and its implications, both of which Jesus manifest and represent, constitute the substance of God’s Spirit.

Therefore, Peter will be an excellent teacher of God’s Spirit to other people because he understands and believes Jesus’ teachings. Accordingly, Jesus trusts that Peter will always teach accurately. This is why Jesus says to him, “*whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven; and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.*” The teachings from Jesus that Peter understands and believes are “*the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven,*” for recall that dwelling in God’s Kingdom or the Kingdom of Heaven means to be certain that you are permanently perfectly righteous in your true identity. To be clear, Peter already has those keys because he already believes Jesus’ teachings, but Jesus speaks in the future tense only as a reference to Peter’s teaching in His stead once He has gone to Heaven. Peter will teach others, as Jesus taught him, about the permanent perfect righteousness of humanity’s permanent true identity in God. Peter will thus metaphorically unlock the gates to the Kingdom of Heaven for people so that they can dwell in it. However, these words that Jesus speaks to Peter are applicable to every person who has the same faith that Peter has. In other words, all Christians are meant to learn, believe, and communicate to others the teachings of Jesus Christ, which are teachings about the covenant truth and its implications. Put in more figurative ways, all Christians, like Peter, have the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, are called to unlock that Kingdom for others, and in doing so, are rocks that form the foundation upon which Jesus builds His assembly.

The covenant truth and its implications, as taught by Jesus, are often called the “Gospel” or the “Gospel message,” and the communication of that “Gospel” or “Gospel message” to others is often called “evangelization.” We often think of evangelization in terms of the pastors in local churches,

but that is just one form of it. Evangelization occurs in many forms, including, but certainly not limited to, mission work, music production, writing, small group fellowship gatherings, the communication of Christian faith from parent to child, and really any public expression that you make of your Christian faith because in such an expression, you testify to the wisdom of having that faith.

Jesus gives some prudent guidelines for conducting evangelization to His contemporary disciples in Matthew 10:7-11:

As you go, preach, saying, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!’ Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. Freely you received, so freely give. Don’t take any gold, silver, or brass in your money belts. Take no bag for your journey, neither two coats, nor sandals, nor staff: for the laborer is worthy of his food. Into whatever city or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you go on.

The shortest summary that I can think of for these guidelines is “honor everybody.” Jesus is basically telling His disciples to honor everybody that they encounter in their ministry. Telling people *“the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand”* is to tell them that peace of mind about their righteousness – i.e. their honor in the judgment of God – is immediately available, for all you need to do to believe that you are permanently perfectly righteous in your true identity is to listen to the Gospel message and believe it.^{cdlx} The disciples will be communicating to all people that their permanent true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God and that they are thus permanently perfectly righteous in their true identity as a result. Such an assertion is the greatest possible honor from God and the disciples to every person who hears it. After all, the disciples preach that all people have the greatest possible honor: permanent perfect honor in the judgment of God as a result of their permanent true identity as His perfect image and likeness.

Jesus further instructs the disciples to honor their audience through generosity. In Near Eastern culture, generosity is an honor to both the donor and the recipient. It implies that the donor has the strength to be generous and thus create good relationships with other people who can be beneficial to him in the future, relationships which are also strengths to the donor. Furthermore, it implies that the recipient is a man who is strong enough for the donor to desire to create a good relationship with him. Jesus commands the disciples to practice generosity in the form of healing the sick, cleansing lepers, and casting out demons. By working these miracles, which are clearly performed by the power of God, the disciples convey the impression that the recipients are people with whom they and, more importantly, God desire to have a good relationship, for the miracles are a form of generosity from God to the people, which are performed through the disciples. Thus, the miracles

are an honor to the people from the disciples and from God and thus are indications that the disciples and God judge them to be honorable.

Additionally, the disciples are to give the people they meet the honor of being generous hosts to them and, by implication, to God as well since the miracles will demonstrate that God clearly endorses the disciples. The people will have the honor of effectively hosting God because they host the disciples, who will be clearly shown to be messengers and agents of God. This is why Jesus commands the disciples to take no extra supplies or money, for this command ensures that the disciples will need to be hosted by the people they meet. “*The laborer is worthy of his food,*” and the people to whom the disciples preach will be the ones providing that food, and other necessities, as generous, honorable hosts.

Thus, we can conclude that the first general guideline that Jesus gives for evangelization is that we should honor other people as much as possible. The apostle Paul expresses the same guideline in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:6-9, in which he describes the ideal minister with terms such as “*gentle, not quarrelsome,*” “*not self-pleasing, not easily angered,*” and “*given to hospitality.*” This guideline makes perfect sense because the message that we are trying to communicate to others in evangelization is that their true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and that they are permanently perfectly righteous as a result of that true identity. As an evangelist, your message is the covenant truth and its implications, so when you treat your audience in accordance with both – namely, when you treat them honorably because you know that they are perfectly honorable in God’s judgment – you make it easier for them to believe your evangelistic message.

However, as much as honoring others is important for evangelization, Jesus is no fool, for He knows that despite honoring others, the disciples will still encounter some people who will respond by dishonoring them. As Jesus says in Matthew 10:11-20:

Into whatever city or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you go on. As you enter into the household, greet it. If the household is worthy, let your peace come on it, but if it isn’t worthy, let your peace return to you. Whoever doesn’t receive you or hear your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake the dust off your feet. Most certainly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city.

“Behold, I send you out as sheep among wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils, and in their synagogues they will scourge you. Yes, and you will be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony to them and to

the nations. But when they deliver you up, don't be anxious how or what you will say, for it will be given you in that hour what you will say. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.

Jesus warns that not everybody is going to receive the disciples' message with good will, so the disciples have to be circumspect about where, when, how, and to whom they preach. They should try to find the people in a given community who are "worthy," which in this context refers to those people who will be open-minded to the Gospel message. Obviously, when evangelizing, you want to choose circumstances in which your audience is most likely to consider and believe your message, but it is also important to choose these circumstances so that your audience does not afflict you as a result of your message. Where Jesus describes such affliction in the passage, His meaning is not so much about the physical nature of the suffering but rather the shame and humiliation that such suffering, and other forms of opposition, will convey to the disciples. This public shame is a threat because in a culture where identity is externally-determined, if people shame you because of your beliefs, then you will be very tempted to conclude that those beliefs are inaccurate and dishonorable and that you are dishonorable in the judgment of people and in the judgment of God for having those beliefs. In other words, Jesus knows that when the disciples are dishonored by people for preaching His Gospel, they will be tempted to abandon that Gospel and Him. That is, they will be tempted to disbelieve the covenant truth and its implications. Accordingly, the disciples, and all Christians, must be judicious regarding how, where, when, and to whom they evangelize, for the maintenance of your Christian faith is no less important than leading other people to Christian faith.

Of course, any evangelization involves risk of rejection by the target audience, and we should not go to the opposite extreme of simply never expressing our Christian faith to anybody. After all, hiding your Christian faith will damage it just as much as, if not more than, being dishonored by people because of your Christian faith. However, too often Christians get the impression that to withhold expression of your faith in situations that you deem to be unwise for such expression is a sin or a betrayal of God, but that is not the Biblical message. You are not "cannon fodder" for the cause of evangelization. You are not commanded by God to seek-out situations in which you will likely be persecuted for your faith. Your life and your faith are important to God, and He has a plan for you in this life. That plan does include opportunities to express your Christian faith and evangelize, but identifying those opportunities will require you to be wise in the Holy Spirit. Such wisdom comes through Bible study, prayer, learning from more experienced Christians, etc.

Nevertheless, the disciples' circumspection will not always yield perfect results. Accordingly, Jesus gives reassurance to His disciples for those inevitable occasions in which they misjudge the wisdom of evangelizing to someone, and that person dishonors them in some way. Jesus says of those occasions, "*let your peace return to you.*" His point is that though the disciples should do their best to avoid these situations, they should also not fear them because their strong Christian

faith will keep their confidence – i.e. their “*peace*” of mind – about their righteousness intact despite any dishonor that they endure from people. Indeed, that peace of mind that one’s true identity is permanently perfectly righteous is the “*peace*” that the disciples are meant to deliver to open-minded people who are willing to learn and believe the covenant truth and its implications, both of which are the substance of the Gospel message. Furthermore, on the occasions in which they are brought before the authorities because of their evangelization efforts, the disciples are called to be “*a testimony to them and to the nations.*” Therefore, while they should avoid being arrested, when they do face adjudication, they must not deny their Christian faith but rather answer the charges against them in accordance with the Holy Spirit, which they have as their own spirit as a product of their Christian faith.

Jesus gives further reassurance by saying “*as you go out of that house or that city, shake the dust off your feet [...] it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city.*” In other words, Jesus is telling the disciples to not take to heart any dishonor that they suffer in the course of their ministry because that dishonor in the judgment of people does not change their perfect honor in the judgment of God. No matter how much you are publicly disgraced for your Christian faith, your true identity is still the perfect image and likeness of Yahweh, and you are still perfectly righteous in that true identity. Furthermore, where Jesus refers to “*the day of judgment,*” His meaning is that in their Christian faith, the disciples have the peace of mind about their righteousness that is eternal life whereas those who lack Christian faith and that resulting peace of mind condemn themselves in their disbelief.^{cdlxii}

Ashamed versus Prudent

For a moment, let’s revisit Luke 9:26, “*For whoever will be ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory, and the glory of the Father, and of the holy angels.*” In the previous section, I describe how Jesus teaches His disciples to be judicious in choosing where, when, how, and to whom to express their faith in Him. Thus, such circumspection is entirely justified for any Christian, but we have to ask, at what point does prudence in choosing opportunities to express your Christian faith actually indicate that you are ashamed of your Christian faith? In other words, on occasions in which you decide to not express your faith, what makes that decision a product of wisdom in the Holy Spirit rather than a product of shame about your faith?

The context of Luke 9:26 implies a very broad standard of what qualifies as being ashamed of your faith. Matthew 10:32-33 restricts the standard to public denial of faith in Jesus Christ. Although, Matthew 10:12-20 depicts Jesus as commanding the disciples to be judicious in evangelization, which is expression of their faith in Him. Furthermore, Jesus says in Matthew 7:6, “*Don’t give*

that which is holy to the dogs, neither throw your pearls before the pigs, lest perhaps they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.” Jesus is referring to the sometimes violent and aggressive behavior of dogs and pigs/hogs/boars,^{cdlxii,cdlxiii,cdlxiv} which makes it dangerous to feed them (i.e. to “give” or “throw” food to them). Such an animal may ignore the food given and instead attack the man holding the container of food. Jesus’ meaning in this metaphor is that you must not communicate your Christian faith in the covenant truth and its implications (i.e. your “holy” “pearls”) to people whom you think reject or will reject those concepts, for they will dishonor you for your faith and thus tempt you to abandon your faith. Just as you would guard your physical safety around dogs and pigs, so too should you guard your spiritual safety around anyone whom you suspect of being hostile toward Christianity.

The Bible ultimately leads us to a narrow standard of what qualifies as an expression of being ashamed of your Christian faith. Namely, being ashamed of your Christian faith is expressed in your denial of that faith when you are asked directly and specifically about it. Keeping your faith private for the sake of protecting it is much different than denying that you have it upon inquiry. If somebody specifically asks you if you are a Christian, or some phrasing to that effect, and you deny yourself to be one even though you consider yourself to be one, then that denial indicates that you are ashamed of your Christian faith. Anything short of that kind of specific, direct denial of your Christian faith after being specifically and directly questioned about it is not an expression of being ashamed of your faith.

Of course, one could argue that such a narrow standard creates a loophole because a man could “judiciously” choose to never express his Christian faith in any setting to any person and thus potentially prevent being asked if he is a Christian. Thus, a man could be ashamed of his faith but avoid facing the questioning that would expose that shame. I suppose that situation could occur in theory, but it is extremely unlikely. Your spirit – i.e. your perspective – motivates your behavior, so having a spirit of sincere Christian faith will motivate you to behave in accordance with it. In other words, the man of sincere Christian faith is naturally going to want to express it in some way. In your Christian faith, you have peace of mind that your true identity is permanently perfectly righteous, and you naturally want to spread that peace of mind to other people, particularly because you know that they are righteous in their true identity just as much as you are. Furthermore, you want to spread awareness of the covenant truth and its implications as a way of honoring God, Who established and upholds both, and Jesus, Who taught you about both.

Aside from evangelization efforts, possible public expressions of Christian faith include attending worship services, wearing Christian jewelry, reading the Bible or other books on Christianity in public, obeying the Law of God, listening to Christian music in public, praying before a meal in public, etc. Even just being in a good mood because of your Christian faith in an environment in which most people are unhappy creates curiosity in others as to why you, alone, are not miserable.

Now, this is not to say that those public exhibitions are the standard of being a sincere Christian. Rather, I only mean that ultimately, it is practically impossible to fully conceal sincere Christian faith from public exposure. You will express it in some way that people notice, and at some point, you will be asked if you are a Christian. If you answer in the affirmative, then you are not ashamed of Jesus and your faith in Him.

One Biblical scene that supports this standard of shame concerning one's Christian faith is Luke 22:54-62:

They seized him and led him away, and brought him into the high priest's house. But Peter followed from a distance. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat among them. A certain servant girl saw him as he sat in the light, and looking intently at him, said, "This man also was with him."

He denied Jesus, saying, "Woman, I don't know him."

After a little while someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them!"

But Peter answered, "Man, I am not!"

After about one hour passed, another confidently affirmed, saying, "Truly this man also was with him, for he is a Galilean!"

But Peter said, "Man, I don't know what you are talking about!" Immediately, while he was still speaking, a rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the Lord's word, how he said to him, "Before the rooster crows you will deny me three times." He went out, and wept bitterly.

In this passage, Jesus has been arrested, and Peter has followed Him to see what will become of Him. Peter is directly and specifically accused of being a follower or associate of Jesus, and this accusation is an implicit question about whether he has faith in Jesus. He denies the accusation three times and so implicitly denies his faith in Jesus three times. After the third time, Peter makes eye contact with Jesus, remembers Jesus' prediction of these denials, and then "*went out, and wept bitterly.*" Why is Peter so sad? Because, he has denied Jesus. He has thus expressed shame regarding his faith in Jesus, and as a result of that shame, he believes himself to be equally denied by Jesus and to be an equal source of shame to Jesus. Accordingly, Peter also concludes that Jesus' teachings about the righteousness of humanity in our true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God no longer apply to him. Assuredly, if after denying Jesus, Peter still had firm faith in his true identity in God and the righteousness of it, then he would have no reason to be sad, for he would be certain that both God and Jesus forgive him the denials.

Of course, Peter's true identity has not changed, so the judgment of Peter's true identity by Jesus and by God has not changed either. Furthermore, Jesus has expressed no rejection of Peter, shame regarding him, or lack of forgiveness for him. Quite to the contrary, after Jesus is resurrected, Peter professes His love for Jesus three times, and Jesus urges Peter three times to carry on His ministry.^{cdlxv} Clearly then, Jesus does not hold against Peter his denial of Him but, rather, still has such esteem for Peter that He wants Peter to continue His ministry in His stead.

The point, though, is that during and after his denial of Jesus, Peter believes that his true identity has changed and that, consequently, Jesus and God reject him and do not forgive him. Remember, as I described previously, all of Jesus' words about denying Him and being ashamed of Him are only externalized ways of describing the concept that if you are ashamed of Jesus – that is, if you believe that His teachings are wrong – then you, not God, will believe yourself to be unlike God in your true identity and thus sinful in your true identity.^{cdlxvi}

Notice two other key pieces of the story. First, nowhere in this story, or its counterparts in the other Gospels, is there any threat of arrest or punishment mentioned regarding Peter or the other disciples. In fact, in John 18:15, another disciple (presumably John) enters the court of the High Priest with Jesus, and there is no mention of that disciple being arrested or punished. That disciple is described as being known to the High Priest, so he likely had the influence to prevent himself and Peter from being arrested. Indeed, if Peter's fear was arrest and punishment, then he never would have followed Jesus to the court in the first place, or having followed, he would have left upon the first accusation of being an associate of Jesus. Second, Peter denies Jesus directly three times over the course of greater than one hour. Thus, Peter had much time to reconsider his first and second denials, and he could have chosen to assert his loyalty to and belief in Jesus on the third questioning. These details in the story are meant to convey the meaning that Peter's denial of Jesus is not a matter of prudence but, rather, of his being ashamed of Jesus. In this moment of Jesus being under arrest, on trial, and held in contempt by the leading men of Israel, Peter has concluded that it is wrong to be a follower of Jesus and to believe His teachings. He has concluded that Jesus' teachings are wrong. Accordingly, he denies his association with Jesus, and thus implicitly his faith in Jesus, in order to spare himself public humiliation for his *supposed* wrongdoing. Of course, this is only a temporary lapse of faith because Peter remembers Jesus' prophecy of his denials and thus is reminded of just how much Divine knowledge and wisdom that Jesus has. Peter then realizes the error of his feeling ashamed of Jesus.

Finally, we can also look to the example of the apostles after Jesus has been resurrected and has ascended to Heaven. Given those events, there is no doubt left that Jesus is the Messiah and that His teachings are accurate representations of God's Spirit. Why, then, do the apostles not all go immediately to the Sanhedrin and proclaim their faith in Jesus Christ? Because, they know that if

they do so, then they will be killed just like Jesus had been killed. After all, the news of Jesus' resurrection and ascension is surely spreading, and the leading men of Israel are all the more zealous to stop the rising popularity of Christianity. In fact, we see such zeal in the chief priests' and elders' attempt to conceal the resurrection of Jesus from public knowledge^{cdlxvii} and in the Sanhedrin's killing of Stephen, the Martyr.^{cdlxviii}

Certainly, the disciples evangelize, but they do not go looking for trouble by preaching to people whom they already know are vehemently hostile toward Jesus and His teachings. For example, in Acts chapters 3 through 4, Peter and John preach in the Temple to the regular people, not the Temple officials, about Jesus. Of course, preaching in the Temple brings greater risk of encountering opposition than does preaching in a rural village, but that circumstance just proves the point I made previously that having sincere Christian faith will lead you to express it in some noticeable way. Peter and John feel compelled by their Christian faith to communicate it to others, so they go to the Temple, where people with strong faith in God are found. They are judicious in choosing their audience in that they select people who have strong faith in God but who are also not predisposed to reject their Christian message.

Nevertheless, the Temple officials learn of this activity and arrest Peter and John. When the Temple officials, rulers, elders, and scribes directly question them about the miraculous healing that they worked – i.e. “*By what power, or in what name, have you done this?*”^{cdlxix} – they answer honestly in accordance with their Christian faith. In other words, they follow Jesus' commands to be circumspect by choosing circumstances for evangelization that minimize the risk of arrest, but when they are arrested and face official questioning, they answer in accordance with the Holy Spirit.

Does the apostles' prudent decision-making about evangelization mean that they are ashamed of their Christian faith? Of course not, for they continue to preach the Gospel message even after being freed from custody. Rather, through their Christian faith, they understand that their lives are valuable to God and that God has plans for them. Namely, they understand that they can do more for the cause of Christian faith, both their own and that of others, by living rather than dying. Even if they believe that their martyrdom would be followed by a resurrection and ascension to Heaven akin to those of Jesus, they do not pursue martyrdom because they know that they have ministerial work to do in this life, as Jesus commanded them in Matthew 28:19-20.

Ecumenism

As I describe in the section titled “The Near Eastern Woman,” the apostle Paul encounters some cultural practices in the course of his evangelization to the Greco-Roman Gentiles that are very different from the practices of his native, Near Eastern culture. Modern Christian evangelists can face the same culture shocks in the course of their ministry, and even Christians who are not engaged in evangelization to people of distant lands can still encounter divergent practices if they visit churches from other denominations of Christianity than the one to which they belong. Even within a given congregation, disputes sometimes arise over standards and practices, such as whether or not to allow female ministers. Much like Paul, our instinctive reaction to practices that are different from our own is criticism and rejection, but as Christianity teaches a true identity in God that applies to all humanity, there should be universal unity among all Christians. The question then becomes how do we have that unity in the midst of very significant cultural and denominational differences? The effort to answer that question is ecumenism, which is “principles and practices [...] promoting or tending toward worldwide Christian unity or cooperation.”^{cdlxx,cdlxxi}

To begin, ecumenism is not achieved by suppressing the practices of one culture or denomination simply because they do not accord with the practices of another culture or denomination. Such a method only breeds resentment in the suppressed congregation. Some may argue that this is the method that Paul uses in his writings about the issues concerning women. However, Paul actually does express a great degree, at least to his mind, of flexibility and tolerance in 1 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 11:5

But every woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered dishonors her head. For it is one and the same thing as if she were shaved.

To the modern Western reader, this statement sounds very restrictive and inflexible, but remember that the Near Eastern culture from which Paul comes considers it dishonorable for women to speak to or in the presence of men to whom they are not closely related. Nevertheless, while Paul does not accept women having their heads uncovered while praying or prophesying in the congregation, he does not prohibit those behaviors when their heads are covered. Thus, Paul makes a tremendous concession regarding his Near Eastern standards of feminine propriety in order to accommodate the Greco-Roman culture of the Corinthian church. In other words, in the pursuit of evangelization and ecumenism, Paul is flexible, but he does have his limits beyond which he feels that the behavior is too dishonorable to tolerate.

Ultimately, the lesson that we should learn from Paul's writing on this matter is one of tolerance for change and cultural differences **where honor is still expressed and perceived in the novel practices and customs.** Remember that the honor we show to others and receive from them is meant to help us better believe in our true identity as God's perfect image and likeness and the perfect righteousness of it.^{cldxxii} The way that we live our lives and worship God should be such that our belief in both is expressed, maintained, and amplified. Paul is willing to tolerate women praying and prophesying publicly so long as they have their heads covered while doing so because he can still perceive in that behavior the preservation of the honor of the women and their menfolk.

As another example, Paul prohibits women from serving as teachers and leaders of men in a congregation,^{cldxxiii} but that prohibition is based upon Paul's cultural upbringing in the Near East. That is, from Paul's Near Eastern perspective, when women engage in free conversation with men to whom they are not related, they dishonor themselves and their menfolk. Furthermore, when they exercise authority over men, as teachers or leaders, they dishonor the men whom they teach or lead by implying that those men are their equals or inferiors in empirical identity.

However, what if Paul is the only one in his congregations that feels that way? What if all the other members do not object to having female teachers and leaders? Ultimately, the only way to determine the righteousness of prohibiting female teachers and leaders in a church is to first determine if the majority of the members of the given congregation perceive dishonor in themselves by being, or submitting to, female teachers and leaders. For the given congregation, if the answer is yes, then the prohibition would be righteous. If the answer is no, then the prohibition would not be righteous.

As a modern example, eating during a worship service would be considered by many modern congregations to be an act that dishonors God and thus causes God to consider your spirit and behavior to be dishonorable. Then again though, some churches have worship services that are specifically intended for families with young children. During those services, it would not be uncommon for the young children to eat a light snack as a means of preventing their restlessness, which would itself be seen as a dishonoring of God. Based upon the context and the people involved, eating during worship is dishonorable in one circumstance but not in another. If the people engaging in the practice do not discern dishonor in that practice, then they should follow it and be allowed to follow it in peace.

Admittedly, people can judge incorrectly. They can incorrectly discern honor in a new custom which ultimately only brings them dishonor, but God sends us corrective action in those scenarios to lead us away from the inappropriate behavior. This is what happened to the Israelites and led to their exile from Israel: they abandoned monotheistic faith in Yahweh and instead began to worship

false, pagan gods because they mistakenly believed that they could find honor in doing so. Yahweh led them to repentance and returned them to their land, and that return reinforced their renewed perception of their honor in the judgment of Yahweh. Certainly, it would have been better if the Israelites never strayed from Yahweh in the first place, but it would not have been better if Yahweh or anyone else had preemptively **forced** them from straying. We are meant to love God of our own free will, so the element of compulsion is not congruous to the type of relationship that God wants to have with us.

Of course, the aforementioned strategy for judging novel practices works wonderfully for the members of the majority opinion of a congregation, but it is not so advantageous for those of the minority opinion. To be frank, if you are in the minority and simply cannot countenance the new practice, sometimes the best solution is to seek a different congregation that better aligns with your perspective. Indeed, this is why it is important for there to be variety in the practice of Christianity among different congregations. The peaceful tolerance of such variety is the best way to achieve ecumenism because that method allows people the opportunity to live and worship as they deem appropriate while also preventing people from feeling the need to constantly argue and defend their practices. When people do not feel the need to defend themselves, they are much more likely to recognize the similarities that they share. Put another way, when people's customs are respected, they are more likely to recognize the shared true identity of all humanity that is the perfect image and likeness of God.

Again, ecumenism is about promoting unity among Christians, and the thing that fundamentally unifies us is our true identity that is the perfect image and likeness of Yahweh, of which we have learned from Jesus Christ. We all share that true identity, so we all also share the perfect righteousness of that true identity. The justification for inter-congregational respect, if not interaction and fellowship, is mutual belief in the covenant truth and its implications, as best taught to us by Jesus Christ.

Formal Ministry

While every Christian is called to be an evangelist of the faith, not every Christian is called to public ministry in the sense of a formal leadership role within a local church congregation. Indeed, the Bible provides criteria for qualifying for such a role.

1 Timothy 3:2-7

² *The overseer therefore must be without reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, modest, hospitable, good at teaching;* ³ *not a drinker, not*

*violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous;*⁴ one who rules his own house well, having children in subjection with all reverence;⁵ (for how could someone who doesn't know how to rule his own house take care of God's assembly?)⁶ not a new convert, lest being puffed up he fall into the same condemnation as the devil.⁷ Moreover he must have good testimony from those who are outside, to avoid falling into reproach and the snare of the devil.

Titus 1:6-9

⁶ if anyone is blameless, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, who are not accused of loose or unruly behavior.⁷ For the overseer must be blameless, as God's steward, not self-pleasing, not easily angered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for dishonest gain;⁸ but given to hospitality, a lover of good, sober minded, fair, holy, self-controlled,⁹ holding to the faithful word which is according to the teaching, that he may be able to exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict those who contradict him.

1 Peter 5:2-4

² shepherd the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion, but voluntarily; not for dishonest gain, but willingly;³ not as lording it over those entrusted to you, but making yourselves examples to the flock.⁴ When the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive the crown of glory that doesn't fade away.

These qualifications seem quite difficult to meet, for what person can truly be “without reproach” and “blameless?” Of course, such words are used as hyperbole to convey the impression that a formal minister must have an excellent reputation among people. He must be able to command the respect of people because his role is to be a long-term, if not life-long, teacher, mentor, and guide to his congregation in the expression, maintenance, and amplification of their Christian faith. The formal minister is not a dictator, who imposes his will upon people by force, so he can only be effective in his ministry if he has the voluntary respect of his congregation and thus voluntary authority among them. As Paul writes, the formal minister must “be able to exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict those who contradict him,” and he can only convince – that is, successfully “exhort” or “convict” – people who respect him and his authority.

The maintenance of his reputation is why the formal minister must be “gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous,” “not self-pleasing, not easily angered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for dishonest gain,” and “given to hospitality, a lover of good, sober minded, fair, holy, self-controlled.” We can summarize those statements as being commands that the formal minister honor people instead of dishonoring them. Remember the Near Eastern concept of reciprocal

honor. When the formal minister honors his congregation, they will honor him in reciprocation with their respect and obedience.

The formal minister must be “*not a new convert, lest being puffed up he fall into the same condemnation as the devil.*” The meaning there is that the minister must have strong, seasoned belief in the covenant truth and its implications. That is, he must firmly believe that all people are permanently equally honorable in the judgment of God because all people have the same permanent true identity that is the perfect image and likeness of God. The formal minister will thus be equipped to resist the temptation to judge himself to be righteous simply because he is esteemed to be preeminently righteous by the congregation as their minister. A self-perception of your righteousness that is based upon your public reputation is unreliable because public opinion is fickle.^{cdlxiv} A man who gauges his righteousness by his public reputation will thus eventually come to disbelieve his righteousness when public opinion turns against him, and disbelieving your righteousness is condemnation, even as bad as the condemnation that belongs to the devil.

Also, the Scripture states that the formal minister must be “*the husband of one wife.*” This requirement does not prohibit divorced and unmarried ministers. Rather, the meaning is that the formal minister is not to have more than one wife at a time and, by implication, not to have concubines alongside his wife. Having multiple romantic partners in one household often leads to conflict between those women, and those conflicts often transform into conflicts between the man and one or more of those women. Being dishonored by his wife or concubine would strain the formal minister’s belief in his true identity in God since his womenfolk are meant to validate that true identity in him by honoring him.^{cdlxv} Furthermore, those conflicts will almost certainly reach public awareness, so the formal minister will be disgraced in the judgment of the congregation and thus will lose authority among its members. Finally, the requirement that a formal minister be “*the husband of one wife*” can also be interpreted to mean that women cannot be formal ministers, but for more information on that topic, please see the previous section titled “Ecumenism.”

Likewise, Scripture describes the ideal formal minister as “*having children in subjection with all reverence; (for how could someone who doesn’t know how to rule his own house take care of God’s assembly?)*” This command is not a prohibition against ministers without children but is rather about the public perception of the minister. If his children are unruly, then their behavior will eventually become known to the congregation, and the minister’s apparent lack of authority over his children will diminish his honor in the judgment of the congregation and thus his authority among them.

Finally, Paul writes that the formal minister “*must have good testimony from those who are outside, to avoid falling into reproach and the snare of the devil.*” As much as the formal minister

has to be concerned with his reputation among his congregation, he also has to be concerned with his reputation among people from outside the congregation. If the formal minister has a bad reputation among people outside the congregation, then reports of that bad reputation will reach the members of the congregation, and those members will lose respect for him. In other words, the temptation – i.e. “*the snare of the devil*” – to any man is to be well-behaved in the sight of his collective members and dissolute in the sight of the general public because it is only the opinion of his collective members that concerns him. All people must resist this temptation, and the formal minister no less so because he has his leadership role only by the consent of the congregation members. If he loses their respect, then he will no longer be their congregational leader, or at the very least, he will no longer be an effective leader.

Fulfillment of Prophecy

One of the justifications for labeling Jesus as the Messiah is His fulfillment of Messianic prophesies that are recorded in the Old Testament. In other words, the fact that God empowers Jesus to fulfill Messianic prophecies proves that Jesus is the Anointed One of God. Accordingly, we can believe Jesus’ teachings to be accurate representations of the Spirit of God.

Again, the prophecies to which I refer are those made in various passages of the Old Testament, and they are typically interpreted as referring in some way to the coming Messiah. A good list of some of these prophecies can be found in The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible,^{cdlxvi} but here I will only give one example. Micah 5:2 states,

*But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
being small among the clans of Judah,
out of you one will come out to me who is to be ruler in Israel;
whose goings out are from of old, from ancient times.*

We can be sure that this verse is considered to be a Messianic prophecy by the people of Jesus’ time and place because in Matthew 2:1-6, the chief priests and scribes advise King Herod that Bethlehem^{cdlxvii} will be the birthplace of the Christ, and they reference this verse as justification for that assertion. Jesus is born in Bethlehem,^{cdlxviii} and His spirit and resulting teachings and behavior (i.e. His “*goings out*”) accord with the covenant truth that was created by God from the very beginning (i.e. “*are from of old, from ancient times*”). Thus, Jesus fulfills this prophecy.

The importance of Jesus fulfilling Messianic prophecies is that it gives Him credibility as the Messiah in the minds of His audience. The logic is that the prophets of the Old Testament are

universally judged by the Jewish people to be authentic communicators of God's Spirit, so their prophecies about the Messiah are considered to be trustworthy. Thus, a man fulfilling a Messianic prediction made by one of those prophets carries the connotation that he has the posthumous testimony of that prophet – and by extension, the active and current testimony of God – that he is the Messiah.

Additionally, Jesus fulfilled His own prophecies about His death and resurrection, such as in Matthew 17:22-23:

While they were staying in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about to be delivered up into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and the third day he will be raised up.”

They were exceedingly sorry.

By the principle of divine fatalism, all things that happen must be in accordance with God's will, so by fulfilling His own prophecies, Jesus demonstrates that He knows the authentic will of God. Consequently, all of Jesus' teachings gain credibility. Namely, Jesus teaches the covenant truth and its implications, and since Jesus has shown Himself to know God's will, it must be God's will that people know the covenant truth and its implications. By extension, the covenant truth and its implications must be accurate, for God would not desire – i.e. will – that His people learn falsehoods.

Nevertheless, fulfillment of prophecy is not an end unto itself but is rather a means to the greater end that people believe in Jesus and His teachings as accurately representing the Holy Spirit. Indeed, once you believe that Jesus is the Messiah and an authentic spokesperson for God, the prophecies that He fulfills should become much less important to you because you focus more upon Jesus' teachings about the covenant truth and its implications. Certainly, it is wonderful that Jesus fulfills Messianic prophecies, but nothing is more awe-inspiring than the realization that you are permanently the perfect image and likeness of God in your true identity.

Fulfillment of the Law

In Matthew 5:17, Jesus says "*Don't think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill.*" Thus, Jesus does not just fulfill prophecies, but He also fulfills the Law of God. Remember from the section titled "The Nature of the Law" that the Law of God is meant to be a tool of faith in the covenant truth that the permanent true identity of humanity is the

perfect image and likeness of God and a tool of faith in the implications of that covenant truth, including the permanent perfect righteousness of our true identity. Remember also from the section titled “Why was the Law not Enough?” that the Law of God is meant to be an expression of the preexisting, permanent, and perfect righteousness of all humanity in our permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God, but the Israelites’ understanding of the Law became corrupt such that they considered it to be a standard that we must meet in order to gain righteousness that we do not currently possess in our true identity or empirical identities.

Jesus fulfills the Law of God – that is, He effectuates its purpose^{cdlxxix} – by manifesting in His words, deeds, death, resurrection, and ascension humanity’s true identity in God and the implications of it. Jesus spends His time validating the righteousness in all people, despite their deeds and living circumstances, so that they will be better able to believe that they are permanently perfectly righteous in their true identity. Jesus’ ability to work miracles makes Him undeniably the Son of God in the minds of those who believe those miracles to be the product of God empowering Jesus. Thus, when Jesus heals people, proclaims forgiveness of people’s sins, and/or validates the righteousness of people in His words,^{cdlxxx} the effect is that they can more easily believe themselves to be righteous in their true identity. Put another way, when the undeniable Son of God treats people as being honorable in His judgment and in the judgment of God, it is all the easier for those people to believe that God judges their true identity to be permanently perfectly honorable. When they believe that their true identity is so honorable in the judgment of God, it is easier for them to believe that their true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God.

Also, as I describe in the section titled “Son of Man and Son of God,” Jesus refers to Himself by those two titles in order to communicate that the permanent true identity of all humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God, and that assertion is all the more credible in the minds of Jesus’ audience precisely because Jesus upholds the righteousness of all people in their true identity, as previously described. Finally, Jesus’ resurrection and ascension clearly demonstrate God’s validation of Jesus’ message about the covenant truth and its implications. I will describe that validation from God later in this chapter.

Gentiles

Significantly, Jesus spends the vast majority of His time on earth ministering to the Jews, with relatively few interactions with Gentiles. In Matthew 15:24, Jesus says to a Gentile woman, “*I wasn’t sent to anyone but the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*” However, that statement of exclusivity is countered by Jesus’ commentary upon the great faith expressed by a Centurion, who is surely a Gentile. Matthew 8:10-11 states “*When Jesus heard it, he marveled and said to those*

who followed, “Most certainly I tell you, I haven’t found so great a faith, not even in Israel. I tell you that many will come from the east and the west, and will sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven.”

In that passage, Jesus indicates that peace of mind about one’s righteousness – i.e. dwelling in “*the Kingdom of Heaven*” – is available to all people, rather than being exclusive to the Jews. As He says, “*many will come from the east and the west, and will sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven.*” The phrase “*the east and the west*” here refers to the Gentile nations.

Additionally, in John 8:12, Jesus says “*I am the light of the world. He who follows me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the light of life.*” Jesus calls Himself “*the light of the world,*”^{cdlxxxii} not just of the Jews, and light is a symbol of honor.^{cdlxxxiii} His meaning is that He manifests the true identity in God, the righteousness that it yields, and the fact that both apply to **all** people. Furthermore, in Jesus’ Great Commission to the apostles, He says, “*Go and make disciples of all nations.*”^{cdlxxxiv}

Finally, and most significantly, Jesus calls Himself the Son of God and the Son of **Man**, not the Son of God and the Son of Israel or Abraham. Thus, Jesus clearly believes that **all** people, not just the Jews, are sons of God – that is, the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity. Therefore, Jesus surely desires that Gentiles have salvation through Christian faith just as much as Jews. Of course, this extension of salvation to the Gentiles also perfectly complies with the fact that the original covenant is between Yahweh and all humanity, as expressed in Genesis 1:26-27.^{cdlxxxv}

Nevertheless, we are still left with the question of why Jesus mostly restricts His ministerial efforts to the Jews. Jesus focuses upon ministry to the Jews because they have been the followers of God for thousands of years. God does not forget His followers, so Jesus wants to lead the Jews back to the kind of faith in God that yields peace of mind about their righteousness based not upon their deeds and living circumstances but upon their permanent true identity as God’s perfect image and likeness. Additionally, just from a logical perspective, given that Jesus’ ministry is based upon the original covenant that is recorded in the Israelite Scriptures, it makes sense that Jesus expects the Jews to be the best audience with whom to begin his ministry because they **should** have the context to best understand His message. Lastly, and more to the point regarding the Gentiles, the Jews are meant to be a motivating example to the Gentiles to lead them to have the same faith in Yahweh that they have. We see this plan expressed in Genesis 12:3, in which God says to Abraham, “*All the families of the earth will be blessed through you.*” It is also expressed in the prophecy of Isaiah 49:6, in which Isaiah records God as saying to the future Messiah, “*It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel. I will also give you as a light to the nations, that you may be my salvation to the end of the earth.*”

However, in their state at the time of Jesus, many of the Jews do not feel the peace of mind about their righteousness that faith in Yahweh should yield. Many Jews believe or are tempted to believe that they are unrighteous because other, more prominent Jews treat them that way based upon their deeds and circumstances in life. Many Jews believe that a man is only righteous if he has a public reputation for righteousness that is based upon his strict compliance with the commands of the Law of God. Therefore, many Jews reject Jesus' message.

If the long-standing publicly-reputed people of God do not all believe themselves to be permanently perfectly righteous in their true identity and treat each other accordingly, then they are not a good testimony to the Gentiles about the covenant truth and the righteousness that it yields. Thus, Jesus focuses His ministry upon the Jews in order to correct their spirits so that they can be a motivating example to the Gentiles to also have faith in God, His covenant truth, the righteousness that it yields, and all the other implications of it. Certainly, if Jesus can convince the majority of the Jews to believe in their true identity as God's perfect image and likeness and the perfect righteousness of it, then their belief will be a very convincing testimony to persuade the Gentiles to believe the same. After all, if the Jews, who have been the publicly-recognized people of Yahweh for thousands of years, judge Jesus to be an accurate representative of God's Spirit, then who among the Gentiles can doubt Jesus to be such an accurate representative? That is, if the Jews believe in the covenant truth and its implications, then who among the Gentiles can dispute it?

Of course, even by the time of Jesus' resurrection and ascension, many Jews still reject Jesus' message. However, there are enough Jews who do believe it, and they form the nucleus of the original evangelization team that will spread the Christian message to the rest of the Jews and to the Gentiles. Significantly though, Jesus' attempt to persuade the majority of the Jews first is proven to be wise by the apostle Paul. In Paul's Epistle to the Romans, he dedicates a large section^{cdlxxxv} to explaining why so many Jews erroneously reject the Christian message and how the salvation of the Gentiles is meant to provoke the Jews to jealousy so that they too will develop Christian faith.

Indeed, Paul is obliged to provide this explanation to justify the value of Christian faith to the Gentiles in the audience of his letter. It is easy to imagine that the fact that so many Jews reject the Christian message is an embarrassment and headwind to any preacher of Christianity. After all, if Jesus' message about the covenant truth and its implications is not judged to be in accordance with God's Spirit by the prominent Jewish scholars or even the majority of the Jews, who have been the publicly-recognized people of God for thousands of years, then why would the Gentiles judge it any differently? Put another way, if Jesus is not convincing to the prominent Jewish scholars or even to the majority of the Jews, who as a people have known Yahweh for thousands of years, then why would the Gentiles find Jesus to be convincing when they are seeking Yahweh for the first

time? This is exactly the kind of “public relations problem” that Jesus tries to prevent with His ministerial focus upon the Jews and that Paul works to counteract in his Epistle to the Romans.

Indeed, praise God because the Christian message cannot be silenced, defeated, or eliminated. Despite all attempts to oppose it, Christian evangelization and proselytization successfully continued and continues even today. As the apostle Paul wrote, *“for I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from God’s love which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*^{cdlxvi}

Sins

One of the principles of traditional Christian doctrine is that Jesus never committed any sins. Of course, the true identity of all humanity is sinless because our true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, in Whom there is no sinfulness, and that true identity belongs to Jesus as well. However, the supposition in traditional Christian doctrine is that Jesus’ behavior during the entirety of His life on earth did not include even one instance of sin. This supposition is erroneous and not supported by the Bible, and it can be a detriment to a Christian’s ability to know and believe his true identity in God. Namely, the supposition conveys the impression that Jesus is better than the rest of humanity because He is supposedly the only One of us Who has never committed a sin. We are meant to identify ourselves with Jesus as having the same true identity and righteousness as Him, so any notion that Jesus is better than us, more righteous than us, or more favored by God than us only impedes that goal.

Please understand that I am not denying the fact that Jesus behaves very righteously, for He does. Significantly though, Near Easterners make great use of hyperbole in their speech and writing to emphasize the point that they wish to make. Thus, it is entirely likely that the Gospels highlight Jesus’ righteous deeds, without giving equal attention to any sins He commits, simply as a form of implicit hyperbole to emphasize the point that Jesus is a very righteously behaved man.

Nevertheless, it would be disingenuous to ignore the fact that there is no direct statement in the Gospels, by Jesus or anyone else, that Jesus never committed a sin in the course of His life. Given that the complete absence of sin in the life of any man would be quite remarkable, it would be a glaring omission for this absence to not be directly stated in the Gospels if, in fact, it is true that Jesus never committed any sin.

Moreover, there are possible examples of sin committed by Jesus that are recorded in the Gospels. In John 5:1-18, Jesus works on the Sabbath. In Luke 2:41-52, Jesus, as a twelve-year-old boy, presumably disobeys His parents by remaining behind in the Temple after they have left Jerusalem. In John 2:13-17, Jesus is recorded as behaving with intense anger in the Temple and disrupting the business of the merchants and moneychangers. Also, and I think very significant, in Matthew 15:21-28, Jesus initially refuses to help the Gentile woman who asks Him to help her daughter. That incident is most noteworthy because it ends with Jesus changing His mind and helping the woman's daughter. One could thus argue that upon realizing the extent of the woman's faith, Jesus *repented* of the sin of previously refusing to help. Certainly, Jesus' aggression in the Temple and His initial refusal to help the Gentile woman do not seem to qualify as loving one's neighbor as oneself.^{cdlxxxvii}

Finally, Jesus' insistence upon being baptized by John the Baptist implies Jesus' awareness of His own sinful behavior. John objects, "*I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?*" In response, Jesus tells John, "*allow it now, for this is the fitting way for us to fulfill all righteousness.*"^{cdlxxxviii} Fulfilling righteousness means to effectuate its purpose,^{cdlxxxix} and the reason that God made us all permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity is so that we will know and believe in that righteousness. After all, peace of mind about your righteousness is eternal life with God.^{cdxc} Fulfilling ***all*** righteousness means effectuating the purpose of righteousness in ***all*** people. In baptism, Jesus will express, maintain, and amplify His belief in the permanent perfect righteousness of His permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God despite His sins, and His baptism will also help all the other people present, as well those who read the Gospel in the future, to be confident that they permanently possess the same true identity and righteousness as well.

Matthew 3:16-17 states,

Jesus, when he was baptized, went up directly from the water: and behold, the heavens were opened to him. He saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming on him. Behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Whether or not the sight of the dove and the sound of the voice of God were literal occurrences, they do have figurative meaning. Namely, Jesus and the audience are confident that He is the Son of God and pleasing to God despite the sins that He has committed. Put another way, Jesus and the audience are confident that He is permanently perfectly righteous in His permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God. The Spirit of God has descended upon Jesus, which indicates that Jesus' spirit about His true identity and the righteousness of it is the same as God's Spirit about Him. Indeed, God directly testifies to Jesus' true identity and the righteousness of it by calling Him His Son and declaring His pleasure regarding Jesus.

Thus, Jesus' righteousness is fulfilled because He is confident about it, but the righteousness of the people in attendance and all future Christians is fulfilled as well because in faith in Jesus Christ, we best know and believe our true identity in God and the permanent perfect righteousness of it. Remember, Jesus does everything He can to portray Himself as equal with every other person. He calls Himself the Son of Man, He associates with even the lowliest people in society, and now He has been baptized like everyone else present. By receiving "*the baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins,*"^{cxdci} Jesus implicitly admits to having committed some sins during His life. Therefore, if people are confident that Jesus, this ordinary Man who has committed sins just like any other man, is the Son of God and is pleasing to God, despite the sins that He has committed, then it is all the easier for them to believe that they are sons of God and pleasing to God despite their sins as well. Put another way, it is all the easier for them to believe that just like Jesus, they are also the perfect image and likeness of God in their permanent true identity and permanently perfectly righteous in their true identity as a result. By extension, it is all the easier for them to believe that God has forgiven their sins just as He has forgiven Jesus' sins. Again, Jesus' ministerial message, concisely summarized, is that every son of man is a son of God, and it is all the easier for us to believe that message since Jesus, the Son of Man and the Son of God, shows Himself to be the same as us.

Of course, Christian scholars can make any number of arguments that justify Jesus' behavior in all those instances, such that the behavior is not sinful and that His baptism is for a different purpose. However, if you are being honest with yourself, you have to consider which assertion is more credible: Jesus never having committed any sin or Jesus being an overall very righteously-behaved Man that did, nevertheless, commit some sins in the course of His life. After all, even the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, "*For since death came by man, the resurrection of the dead also came by man. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.*" The death to which he refers is a man's perception of himself as being unlike God and thus sinful in his true identity, and that perception is expressed in committing sins. Paul states that this death applies to all people – i.e. descendants of Adam. Thus, it applies to Jesus as well because Jesus is a human being. Resurrection and salvation – that is, the perception of one's permanent perfect righteousness of true identity – comes to all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, not because He never committed any sins but because He believes, teaches, and manifests the covenant truth and its implications, namely that sinfulness is never part of humanity's true identity and thus that sin does not accurately express our true identity nor change it.

To be fair, there are a few passages in the New Testament, outside the Gospels, that can be interpreted, albeit erroneously, to indicate that Jesus never committed any sins. I will explain two examples.

1. **1 Peter 2:19-24:** *For it is commendable if someone endures pain, suffering unjustly, because of conscience toward God. For what glory is it if, when you sin, you patiently endure beating? But if when you do well, you patiently endure suffering, this is commendable with God. For you were called to this, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving you an example, that you should follow his steps, who didn't sin, "neither was deceit found in his mouth." When he was cursed, he didn't curse back. When he suffered, he didn't threaten, but committed himself to him who judges righteously. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live to righteousness. You were healed by his wounds.*

This passage seems like a very direct statement that Jesus never committed any sin, but the author's meaning here is not that Jesus never committed any sin during His entire life but only that He did not sin in relation to His crucifixion. Jesus is unjustly crucified, but He does not respond by abandoning His faith in God. Furthermore, He does not retaliate against His accusers or executioners by stating or implying that they are any less righteous in their true identity than He is. Specifically, Jesus does not curse or threaten anyone with retaliation from God for crucifying Him. The lesson to us is that like Jesus, we should not sin in response to the sins that are committed against us by others.

2. **2 Corinthians 5:21:** *For him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf [...]*

The use of the words "*knew no sin*" is purposeful. The phrase is not referring to a record of Jesus' behavior but, rather, to Jesus' knowledge and belief that sinfulness is never part of His, nor the rest of humanity's, permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God. Put another way, Jesus believed that sins neither accurately express His and the rest of humanity's true identity in God nor change it.^{cdxcii}

Finally, we must remember that in the Near Eastern culture of Jesus' time and place, where a person's identity is externally-determined by other people, whether or not a man is a sinner is a matter of perspective. Certainly, the popular religious scholars of the day, such as the Pharisees, definitely consider Jesus to be a sinner, even the worst sinner imaginable. When Jesus hangs on the cross, He is portrayed as a terrible sinner in that He suffers a punishment meant to inflict an intensely painful death and intense and widespread public humiliation, which for a Near Easterner is just as fearsome as physical pain. Furthermore, by the principle of divine fatalism, many of the people who see Jesus crucified conclude that He must be a terrible sinner since God is willing to allow Him to suffer this death. Of course, that is an erroneous interpretation of God's Spirit on the matter, but it is their interpretation nonetheless.

Thus, to the Near Eastern observers of Jesus' death and to the Near Eastern audience of the Gospels, Jesus goes to His death as an undeniable and terrible sinner simply because that is the external judgment and definition that is placed upon Him by many prominent religious scholars and many other people. Whether or not you, as a modern student of the Bible, believe that Jesus committed any sins during His life, this externally-determined identity placed upon Him, as being a terrible sinner, is nevertheless an important point to remember because it is part of understanding Jesus' subsequent victory over sin, which I will describe in the next section.

Death, Resurrection, and Ascension

Jesus was crucified, died, was resurrected, and finally ascended to Heaven, and in that sequence of events is the ultimate vindication and victory for Jesus, for the covenant truth that He preached and manifested, and for all those who believe in Him as Messiah, Lord, Savior, the Son of Man, and the Son of God. This victory is the victory over sin; it is the vindication of Jesus and all humanity, in which it is proven that sinfulness is never part of our true identity.

Whether you believe that Jesus did or did not commit any sins during the course of His life, what is not in dispute is that Jesus is considered to be a terrible sinner by many Jews of his time, including many of the prominent religious scholars. What causes this perception? Consider these excerpts from Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin, which was the highest Jewish council.

Matthew 26:63-66

But Jesus stayed silent. The high priest answered him, “I adjure you by the living God that you tell us whether you are the Christ, the Son of God.”

Jesus said to him, “You have said so. Nevertheless, I tell you, after this you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of the sky.”

Then the high priest tore his clothing, saying, “He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Behold, now you have heard his blasphemy. What do you think?”

They answered, “He is worthy of death!”

Mark 14:61-64

But he stayed quiet, and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?”

Jesus said, “I am. You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of the sky.”

The high priest tore his clothes and said, “What further need have we of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy! What do you think?” They all condemned him to be worthy of death.

Luke 22:66-71:

As soon as it was day, the assembly of the elders of the people were gathered together, both chief priests and scribes, and they led him away into their council, saying, “If you are the Christ, tell us.”

But he said to them, “If I tell you, you won’t believe, and if I ask, you will in no way answer me or let me go. From now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.”

They all said, “Are you then the Son of God?”

He said to them, “You say it, because I am.”

They said, “Why do we need any more witness? For we ourselves have heard from his own mouth!”

In each account, Jesus implicitly or explicitly refers to Himself as both the Son of Man and the Son of God. Recall from the section titled “Son of Man and Son of God” that Jesus being both means that He represents the covenant truth that all human beings – i.e. sons of man – are the perfect image and likeness of God in our permanent true identity – i.e. sons of God. While Jesus does also admit to being the Christ, it is not that claim that enrages the members of the Sanhedrin. Rather, it is His equation of the Son of Man with the Son of God and thus with the Christ that infuriates them because the implication of that equation is that every human being is a son of God, the perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity, part of God’s collective, and just as righteous as the Messiah. In fact, while there is no way to know for sure, I believe that because of Jesus’ miracles, the leading religious scholars of the day would accept Him as the Messiah if it were not for the fact that He teaches that all people are sons of God.

The prominent religious scholars of the time do not believe that an ordinary, common man is a son of God in the sense of being the perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity, part of God’s collective, and perfectly righteous in his true identity. They do not even believe that they, as the publicly-esteemed pillars of righteousness, are sons of God in that way. They do not believe that a man has any inherent and permanent righteousness. Of course, they know the content of Genesis 1:26-27, but they believe that with the introduction of sin into the world, humanity ceased

to be the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity and thus ceased to be part of God's collective. They believe that with the introduction of sin into the world, humanity became sinful not only in our empirical identities but in our true identity as well. To their minds, a degree of righteousness, albeit not perfect righteousness, can be gained in a man's empirical identity and true identity only through his deeds and the resulting public reputation for righteousness. In fact, to their minds, since the original sin of Adam and Eve, the only man who is a son of God – that is, who matches the description in Genesis 1:26-27 – is the coming Messiah.

A similar incident of opposition to the concept that all people are sons of God is found in John 10:25-40:

Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you don’t believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name, these testify about me. But you don’t believe, because you are not of my sheep, as I told you. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give eternal life to them. They will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all. No one is able to snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”

Therefore the Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, “I have shown you many good works from my Father. For which of those works do you stone me?”

The Jews answered him, “We don’t stone you for a good work, but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.”

Jesus answered them, “Isn’t it written in your law, ‘I said, you are gods?’ If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture can’t be broken), do you say of him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, ‘You blaspheme,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God?’ If I don’t do the works of my Father, don’t believe me. But if I do them, though you don’t believe me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.”

They sought again to seize him, and he went out of their hand. He went away again beyond the Jordan into the place where John was baptizing at first, and he stayed there.

In that passage, Jesus directly describes how He is part of the collective of God by claiming that God is His Father, that He is the Son of God, and that He and the Father are one. Jesus then references Psalm 82, in which the Israelites are referred to as gods and sons of God, and Jesus makes the point that the Psalms are Scripture that the Jews accept as being the authentic word of God – i.e. the Psalms are Scripture that “can’t be broken.” The meaning in that quote from Psalm

82 is that the Israelites, and all humanity by extension, are part of the collective of God and thus share His collective identity.^{cdxciii} Jesus' point is that the very Scripture that the Jews believe to be an accurate representation of God's Spirit describes their own ancestors, who were ordinary human beings, as being sons of God. Therefore, it surely cannot be blasphemy for Jesus, Who is a man empowered by God to work miracles in the furtherance of His ministry, to call Himself the Son of God. This argument infuriates the Jews, and they seek to seize Jesus and kill Him.

Yet another incident of such opposition is in John 5:18: "*For this cause therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill [Jesus], because he not only broke the Sabbath, but also called God his own Father, making himself equal with God.*"

Some people may point out that the Pharisees do refer to themselves as sons of God in John 8:41, where they say to Jesus, "*We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father, God.*" However, in that context, they only mean that they obey God like a man obeys his father. They make that statement in refutation of Jesus' assertion that He obeys His Father whereas they obey a different authority – i.e. a different "father." In other words, the Pharisees riposte that they, Jesus, and all the rest of the Israelites obey the same Authority: Yahweh. Given the context that is the passages from John chapters 5 and 10, as described previously, the Pharisees clearly do not mean that they share the collective identity of Yahweh. After all, they include Jesus in their assertion that God is the Father of them all, and their opposition to Jesus makes it obvious that they do not consider Him to have God's collective identity.

Some people might also object that there are passages in the Old Testament that identify God as the Father of the Israelites, and that is true.^{cdxciv} The Old Testament also identifies the Israelites as God's chosen people.^{cdxcv} However, given the Jews' reaction to Jesus' quotation of Psalm 82, as previously described, it is reasonable to conclude that in Jesus' time, the popular interpretation of such Old Testament references stops short of considering the Israelites to be the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity and thus part of God's collective.

The sad irony about the popular religious scholars is that they futilely chase after a secure confidence about their righteousness through punctilious obedience to the Law of God and cultivation of a public reputation for righteousness, yet they deny the covenant truth by which they can have secure peace of mind about their righteousness. Indeed, Jesus manifests the covenant truth that all humanity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity and thus permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity. In other words, by refusing to have faith in Jesus Christ, the popular religious scholars deny themselves the peace of mind that they seek about their righteousness.

Instead, they continue to seek whatever incomplete, tenuous, and fleeting sense of righteousness that they can obtain from public esteem, and even Pilate recognizes that the religious officials seek Jesus' death because of their desire for public esteem. As it states in Matthew 27:18, "*For [Pilate] knew that because of envy they had delivered [Jesus] up.*" In other words, the religious officials seek to have Jesus killed not because they are concerned about the repercussions from God if they tolerate Jesus' supposed blasphemy, though they do surely believe Him to be a blasphemer, but rather because Jesus' growing popularity among the masses threatens the religious officials' public reputation for righteousness and the public esteem that they receive because of that reputation. Though He knows that His righteousness comes from His true identity in God, Jesus nevertheless has developed a reputation for righteousness among many people who then treat Him with special esteem,^{cdxcvi} and that circumstance diminishes the special esteem that the scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees receive.

However, the greater threat that Jesus poses to them is that He preaches a permanent perfect righteousness that applies to all humanity despite our deeds, living circumstances, and reputations. Therefore, as Jesus gains popularity, more people believe His teachings, and people who believe His teachings about the inherent, permanent, and perfect righteousness of all people consider the behavioral righteousness of the scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees to be unremarkable. In other words, if everybody begins to believe that they are inherently, permanently, and perfectly righteous because of their permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God, despite their deeds, living circumstances, and reputations, then nobody is going to consider the popular religious scholars to be preeminently righteous because of their strict compliance with the Law of God. Therefore, the public will no longer treat the popular religious scholars with special esteem, and without that special public esteem, the popular religious scholars will not be able to believe that they possess any righteousness.

Given that Jesus is rebuked by the leading men of Israel and sent to the cross by them, the Near Eastern audience of the Gospels receives the impression that Jesus is a terrible sinner, that His teachings are contrary to God's Spirit, and that He is punished by God for His sins in accordance with the principle of divine fatalism. That is, they receive that impression up to and including the point in the story when He dies. With Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the Near Eastern audience of the Gospels receives a strong impression of Jesus' great righteousness and the accuracy of Jesus' teachings about all humanity's permanent true identity in God and the permanent perfect righteousness of it. The fact that God resurrects Jesus and subsequently invites Him into Heaven – i.e. Jesus' ascension to Heaven – vindicates Jesus and His ministry about the covenant truth and its implications.

Jesus' resurrection and ascension are God's testimony that Jesus is an accurate representative of God's Spirit, which proves that Jesus is not a blasphemer and that His teachings are not blasphemy.

They are God's testimony to the accuracy and permanence of the covenant truth and its implications, both of which form the substance of Jesus' ministerial message. The leading men in Israel deem Jesus to be worthy of the most dishonorable death for His belief and teaching that all people, despite our sins, are permanently the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity and permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity as a result. Nevertheless, God deems Jesus to be worthy of life and the most glorious restoration of it. In resurrecting Jesus and bringing Him to Heaven, God testifies that the Son of Man is truly the Son of God and, thus, that a son of man is truly a son of God. God testifies that, just as Jesus manifested in word and deed, humanity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity. Therefore, God testifies that all humanity does have permanent perfect righteousness, for our permanent perfect righteousness is in our permanent true identity. Put another way, God demonstrates His belief that all humanity, in our true identity, despite the sins that we commit, the dishonorable circumstances in which we may live, and the reputations for sinfulness that we may acquire, is equally, permanently, and perfectly honorable in His judgment – that is equally, permanently, and perfectly righteous – because our true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness.

Furthermore, Jesus' resurrection and ascension communicate and affirm God's forgiveness of all humanity's sins. In that resurrection and ascension, humanity is validated by God as being permanently perfectly righteous in our permanent true identity, despite the sins that we commit, so we can conclude that God must have forgiven our sins. God must not hold them against our true identity – that is, He must not attribute sinfulness to our true identity. More to the point, Jesus' resurrection and ascension are God's validation of Jesus' teaching that all human beings are permanently sons of God – i.e. permanently the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity and thus permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity. That true identity is the reason why God has forgiven our sins, for sin is motivated by and expresses the **erroneous** belief that your true identity is sinful – i.e. unlike God and thus dishonorable in His judgment. God has forgiven our sins – i.e. does not hold them against our true identity – because He knows that they do not accurately express our true identity nor change it.

In summary, Jesus' resurrection and ascension are God's testimony that our true identity, not our empirical identity, determines our righteousness – i.e. our honor in His judgment – and that our true identity is permanently perfectly righteous because it is permanently His perfect image and likeness.

This is why Jesus is the perfect sacrifice, once and for all. Many animal sacrifices performed in the Temple are in response to sins as they occur in the life of a man or the community. Yes, they communicate God's forgiveness of sins, but they also inadvertently imply that more sacrifices will be needed for future sins. Those Israelites who have the corrupted spirit that righteousness ultimately comes from one's deeds interpret those sacrifices to be deeds that they have to practice

in order to expiate sin and thus gain righteousness. Jesus' death is figuratively the question of whether or not sinfulness is ever part of the true identity of humanity. With Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the answer from God comes back crystal-clear and final: IS NOT! No further sacrifice for sins is needed when you are confident that sin is never an accurate expression of your true identity nor able to change it. After all, if humanity is vindicated as being the perfect image and likeness of God in our permanent true identity, then no sinfulness can ever be part of our true identity because no sinfulness is ever part of God. That is, God is never unlike Himself nor dishonorable in His own judgment, so His perfect image and likeness cannot, by definition, be unlike Him nor dishonorable in His judgment either.

A key point, though, in the death and resurrection story of Jesus Christ is that we must remain strong in the belief that sinfulness is never part of our true identity because our permanent true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. Only by believing in that permanent true identity and the permanent perfect righteousness that it yields to us can we have eternal life with God. While Jesus suffers on the cross, He refuses to believe that the content of His ministry is false. Despite the externally-determined definition of Him by so many prominent religious men, Jesus refuses to believe that His teachings are blasphemy and thus that He and the rest of humanity are sinful in our true identity. He stays faithful to the word of God about the true nature of humanity.

We see this faith in Jesus' words on the cross in Matthew 27:46, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" Of course, God did not forsake Jesus, as we come to realize once Jesus is resurrected, but, in the moment of Jesus hanging on the cross, it surely *seems* like God forsakes Him. Remember that in Near Eastern culture, identity is externally-determined. In the extreme state of pain and humiliation that is crucifixion, any Near Easterner would be very tempted to believe that he must be extremely sinful, for he would reason that his crucifixion is the community and God testifying to his sinfulness of true identity and empirical identity.

Thus, while on the cross, Jesus is very tempted to abandon His beliefs and teachings. However, Jesus does not say "My God, my God, you have forsaken me!" Instead, Jesus **asks** "*why have you forsaken me?*"^{cxdvii} That "why" is incredibly significant because it implies that Jesus does not agree that His suffering and humiliation are warranted by His beliefs and teachings. In other words, Jesus stays firm in belief in His teachings that all human beings are permanently the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity and permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity as a result. Jesus stays firm in this belief even to the very end of His life. As Luke 23:46 states, "*Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!' Having said this, he breathed his last.*" Jesus committing His spirit into the hands of God means that Jesus affirms His belief that His spirit – that is, His perspective that composes the content of His teachings – accords with the Spirit of God – that is, it accords with that which God believes. Put

another way, Jesus states that He will continue to believe that which He has learned from God no matter the consequences, even unto death.

Jesus' confident belief in the covenant truth and the righteousness that it yields is what allows God to resurrect Jesus and what allows Jesus to ascend into Heaven and have eternal life with God. Jesus' resurrection and ascension are literal, but both have figurative, doctrinal meaning that centers upon Jesus' beliefs. Remember, God's judgment of all humanity was fixed permanently in Genesis 1:26-27, in which God declared that our permanent true identity is His perfect image and likeness. Accordingly, God judges us to be permanently perfectly honorable – i.e. permanently perfectly righteous – in our true identity. The variable that remains is whether or not we agree with God about our true identity and the righteousness of it. In order to have eternal life with God, which ultimately is peace of mind about your righteousness,^{cxxxviii} you must follow Jesus' example and sincerely believe, despite all earthly indications to the contrary, that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and thus permanently perfectly righteous.

Let's return for a moment to 2 Corinthians 5:21,^{cxcix} “*For him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” Jesus manifests the true identity of humanity as being permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and thus permanently perfectly righteous. With that perspective, Jesus “*knew no sin*” in the sense that He knows that sin does not accurately express His and every other human being's true identity nor change it. Nevertheless, Jesus' crucifixion portrays Him as being a terrible sinner Who is condemned by God because God judges Him to be totally devoid of righteousness. Figuratively and hyperbolically speaking then, God “*made [Jesus] to be sin on our behalf*” in the sense that God allowed Jesus to be crucified to represent for all people the notion that humanity is sinful – i.e. unlike God and dishonorable in His judgment – in our true identity. Put another way, though Jesus firmly believes the covenant truth and its implications, God allows Him, for our benefit, to portray, in crucifixion, an externalized version of what every man erroneously believes about himself when he sins.

However, God subsequently resurrects Jesus, and Jesus later ascends to eternal life with God in Heaven. In that resurrection and ascension, God validates the covenant truth that humanity's true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. Put another way, God validates the fact that His righteousness – that is, “*the righteousness of God*” – is the righteousness of humanity. Remember, righteousness refers to what we “ought to be” as determined by God and our honor in the judgment of God.^d The way that humanity “ought to be” is as God made us: His perfect image and likeness. Therefore, the way that we “ought to be” is the way that God “ought to be.” Humanity is as we “ought to be” in our true identity precisely because our true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. Furthermore, knowing our true identity to be the perfect image and likeness of God, we can conclude that God judges us to be just as honorable as He judges Himself

to be. Thus, defining righteousness as honor in the judgment of God, we permanently have “*the righteousness of God*” in our true identity. We know and believe this righteousness to be ours by having faith in Jesus Christ – that is, by having faith in His teachings and in His resurrection and ascension that prove their accuracy. As Paul puts it, “*in [Jesus] we might become the righteousness of God.*”

After all, what clearer way is there to vindicate a message than to raise its best messenger, who never forsakes that message, from the abject disgrace of crucifixion to the highest glory of resurrection and ascension to Heaven? What better way is there to demonstrate and convince people that the covenant truth and its implications apply permanently and to all people, even to those who commit the most sins, than to have the best messenger of that covenant truth and its implications be first portrayed as a terrible sinner and then be vindicated unto extreme glory and righteousness?

Finally, consider the words of 2 Corinthians 5:18-19:

But all things are of God, who reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ, and gave to us the ministry of reconciliation; namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not reckoning to them their trespasses, and having committed to us the word of reconciliation.

God was reconciling the world to Himself in Jesus Christ, “**not reckoning to them their trespasses.**”^{di} In other words, in Jesus Christ, God communicates to us His forgiveness of our sins. Namely, the basis upon which God has forgiven all our sins is our permanent true identity as His perfect image and likeness. That true identity is our righteousness, even “*the righteousness of God.*” In His ministry, Jesus manifests that covenant truth and the righteousness that it yields, and God testifies to the accuracy of that covenant truth and that righteousness by resurrecting Jesus from the death that He suffered on account of His ministry and later welcoming Jesus to eternal life with Him in Heaven.

Literal or Figurative Resurrection?

Most Christians, including myself, believe that Jesus’ resurrection was a literal, bodily resurrection from death. Of course, there is no way for us, approximately 2000 years removed from the event, to objectively prove that Jesus was literally resurrected, so belief in the literal resurrection of Jesus is entirely a matter of faith. I believe in it because God has consistently upheld the covenant truth and its implications throughout humanity’s history, and therefore, resurrecting the best Messenger

of that covenant truth and its implications in order to validate both is something that I believe God would certainly do and has done.

The matter at hand, though, is whether the New Testament writers meant to convey the impression that Jesus' resurrection was literal or figurative. Most Christians, including myself, believe that they intended to communicate a literal resurrection. However, some Biblical scholars believe it to have been only a figurative resurrection that the New Testament writers describe. They interpret Jesus' resurrection as meaning that though He died, His teachings live in all those who believe those teachings.^{di,di} Of course, as I described in the previous section, Jesus' resurrection certainly does have figurative, doctrinal meaning. Indeed, praise God, for Jesus' teachings surely have lived-on after His death, resurrection, and ascension. However, I would like to explain why I believe that the New Testament writers meant to convince people that Jesus' resurrection was literal.

First, consider Matthew 27:62-66 – 28:1-7,11-15:

27:62 Now on the next day, which was the day after the Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees were gathered together to Pilate,⁶³ saying, “Sir, we remember what that deceiver said while he was still alive: ‘After three days I will rise again.’⁶⁴ Command therefore that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest perhaps his disciples come at night and steal him away, and tell the people, ‘He is risen from the dead;’ and the last deception will be worse than the first.”

65 Pilate said to them, “You have a guard. Go, make it as secure as you can.”⁶⁶ So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone.

28:1 Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb.² Behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from the sky and came and rolled away the stone from the door and sat on it.³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.⁴ For fear of him, the guards shook, and became like dead men.⁵ The angel answered the women, “Don’t be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus, who has been crucified.⁶ He is not here, for he has risen, just like he said. Come, see the place where the Lord was lying.⁷ Go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has risen from the dead, and behold, he goes before you into Galilee; there you will see him.’ Behold, I have told you.”

11 Now while they were going, behold, some of the guards came into the city and told the chief priests all the things that had happened.¹² When they were assembled with the elders and had taken counsel, they gave a large amount of silver to the soldiers,¹³ saying, “Say that his disciples came by night and stole

*him away while we slept.¹⁴ If this comes to the governor's ears, we will persuade him and make you free of worry."*¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were told. This saying was spread abroad among the Jews, and continues until today.

After Jesus has been buried, the chief priests and the Pharisees are concerned that Jesus' disciples will steal His body, hide it, and then proclaim that He has risen from death based solely upon the fact that His body is not in His tomb. They ask Pilate to assign a guard for Jesus' tomb to prevent this occurrence, and Pilate agrees. The guards at the tomb witness the scene with the angel and presumably inspect the tomb and find it empty, for they report these events to the chief priests, who then bribe the guards to lie about what has happened.

Suppose for a moment that the resurrection of Jesus is meant to be interpreted as a figurative occurrence and that every Biblical mention of Him being alive after His death is simply an instance of one of His followers having a "vision" of Him and continuing to believe His teachings. If that is the Gospel writer's intention, then this story about the guards is entirely unnecessary and misleading. Rather, the inclusion of this story about the guards only makes sense if the Gospel writer feels the need to dispel a false rumor that circulates about Jesus' resurrection, which is precisely the motive alluded to in Matthew 28:15.

If the point of the resurrection story is only to convey the impression that Jesus' **teachings** have lived-on after His death, then it would be sufficient to restrict the narrative to occasions in which His disciples have visions of Him after His death. Put another way, a story about the endurance of only Jesus' **message** does not need evidence that His corpse is missing in order to be credible.

Consider also this scene from John 20:24-29, which goes to great lengths to emphasize the literal nature of Jesus' resurrection.

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, wasn't with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

After eight days, again his disciples were inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, the doors being locked, and stood in the middle, and said, "Peace be to you." Then he said to Thomas, "Reach here your finger, and see my hands. Reach here your hand, and put it into my side. Don't be unbelieving, but believing."

Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus said to him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.”

We may be tempted to label this story as merely a vision that occurs in the mind of Thomas and the rest of the disciples, but the interaction between Jesus and Thomas destroys that interpretation. Namely, Thomas acknowledges the presence of the literal, bodily Jesus based upon his interaction with Jesus in His literally-resurrected body that bears the wounds of crucifixion. Obviously, there is a heavy emphasis here upon the literal nature of Jesus' resurrection because the implication is that Thomas literally touches the wounds of Jesus' literal body. Again, if the Gospel writer's intention is to communicate a figurative resurrection and the endurance of only the teachings of Jesus, then this story is unnecessary and misleading.

Moreover, the apostle Paul personally knows the original apostles of Jesus,^{div} yet Paul never writes in His letters of Jesus' resurrection being only a figurative occurrence. Furthermore, Paul is a Near Easterner himself, so he is capable of properly interpreting the original apostles' description of Jesus' resurrection. He would know if they meant a figurative rather than a literal resurrection. Certainly, if Paul had learned from the original apostles that Jesus' resurrection was only figurative, then he would specify it to be so in his writings because doing so would make his job as an apostle that much easier. In other words, imagine how much easier it would have been for Paul to evangelize if he could just tell his audience that Jesus was not literally resurrected from death but that Jesus' disciples only say that He was resurrected as a way of proclaiming their continuing belief in His teachings. After all, it is easier to persuade people of a figurative, symbolic resurrection rather than a literal, bodily resurrection. Yet, Paul never describes Jesus' resurrection as being figurative in his letters.

High Priest

The author of the Book of Hebrews asserts that Jesus is the permanent and perfect High Priest of the Israelites. Recall from the section titled “The Purpose of the Priesthood” that the High Priest is the primary figurehead of the Israelite priesthood and thus the primary symbol of God’s perspective and judgment of the Israelites and really of all humanity. Specifically, he is to represent the people’s permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God and the permanent perfect righteousness that they have in that true identity.

Recall from the section titled “Son of Man and Son of God” that Jesus is the best manifestation and representation of the true identity of all humanity. Namely, Jesus manifests in His words, deeds,

death, resurrection, and ascension that all humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God in our permanent true identity and thus permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity as a result. However, from the Israelite point of view, Jesus cannot fill that role without also being the High Priest because the High Priest is supposed to be the symbol of humanity as we are in the judgment of Yahweh. That point of contention is why the author of the Book of Hebrews goes to great lengths to explain how Jesus is the permanent and perfect High Priest.

However, in the effort to justify Jesus as the High Priest, the author immediately encounters a problem. Specifically, the Law of God states that the High Priest, and any ordinary priest, is to come only from the line of Aaron, who was part of the Israelite tribe of Levi.^{dv} That is, all priests must be a patrilineal descendant of Aaron.^{dvi} Jesus is not patrilineally descended from Aaron nor anyone else from the tribe of Levi, but rather from the tribe of Judah.^{dvii} Thus, according to the Law of God as delivered by Moses, Jesus cannot be the High Priest, but the author of the Book of Hebrews recalls the words of Psalm 110:4, “*Yahweh has sworn, and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.’*”^{dviii} Through that piece of Scripture, the author realizes how Jesus can be Scripturally justified as High Priest.

Melchizedek was the king of Salem to whom Abraham gave a tenth of the goods recovered when Abraham (formerly known as “Abram”) defeated Chedorlaomer and his forces. The story is told in Genesis 14:17-20:

The king of Sodom went out to meet him after his return from the slaughter of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, at the valley of Shaveh (that is, the King’s Valley). Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High. He blessed him, and said, “Blessed be Abram of God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth. Blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand.”

Abram gave him a tenth of all.

Significantly, the passage specifies that Melchizedek “was priest of God Most High.” In other words, Melchizedek was a priest of Yahweh long before the Law of God was ever taught and recorded by Moses. This is exactly the Scriptural precedent that the author of the Book of Hebrews needs to justify Jesus as High Priest, for if Melchizedek was a priest of Yahweh outside of the requirements of the Law delivered by Moses, then Jesus can be a priest – even the High Priest – of Yahweh outside of those requirements as well.

Hebrews 7:1-3:

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of God Most High, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, to whom also Abraham divided a tenth part of all (being first, by interpretation, “king of righteousness”, and then also “king of Salem”, which means “king of peace”, without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God), remains a priest continually.

In that passage, the author details the legal justification for Jesus being a High Priest by comparing Him to the example of Melchizedek. Melchizedek was a priest of Yahweh “without father, without mother, without genealogy,” which is another way of saying that he was a priest despite not being a descendant of Aaron – i.e. despite not having the proper “genealogy.” Therefore, Jesus’ lack of proper genealogy is not an impediment to Him being the High Priest.

However, this comparison between Melchizedek and Jesus – i.e. the justification of Jesus being High Priest in the “order” or “manner”^{dix} of Melchizedek – is not just some legal loophole; it has great doctrinal significance as well. Namely, the author indicates that in Hebrew, “Melchizedek” means “king of righteousness,”^{dx} and “Salem” means “peace,” which in this context refers to having peace of mind that you are “complete” and “perfect.”^{dxi} Therefore, Melchizedek is figuratively king of righteousness and peace. Recall that Jesus’ ministry is all about communicating the preexisting covenant truth that all humanity has the true identity that is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. Hence, all humanity is permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity, and knowing that to be true, a human being has peace of mind about his righteousness. Put another way, the man who has faith in Jesus and His teachings has the peace of mind that comes from believing that in his true identity, he is permanently, completely, and perfectly as God knows he should be and thus permanently perfectly honorable in God’s judgment – i.e. permanently perfectly righteous. Therefore, the author of the Book of Hebrews makes the point that like Melchizedek, Jesus is the King of righteousness and peace.

Finally, the author states that Melchizedek was “made like the Son of God.” Obviously, “the Son of God” is a reference to Jesus. The author’s point is that both Jesus and Melchizedek were anointed by God directly, independent of the commands of the Law of God from Moses, to serve the ministerial role of manifesting the covenant truth and the permanent perfect righteousness that it yields to us. Melchizedek fulfilled that role by validating Abraham’s membership in God’s collective and thus his righteousness by saying, “Blessed be Abram of God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth.”^{dxi} Note that in Genesis 14:17-20, Abraham only tithes to Melchizedek after Melchizedek delivers the blessing, which indicates that Melchizedek had a preexisting belief in Abraham’s true identity in God and the righteousness of it. Likewise, Jesus is a priest, even the High Priest, of God because out of all people, He best manifests humanity’s preexisting and permanent true identity in God and the preexisting, permanent, and perfect righteousness of it. Furthermore, the priesthood of both Melchizedek and Jesus is timeless – i.e. “having neither beginning of days nor end of life” – because they believed in and manifested the covenant truth and

the righteousness that it yields, both of which have existed from the very beginning and continue without end.

Some people might object that by the aforementioned reasoning, any human being who believes in and manifests the covenant truth and its implications is a priest of God. That is entirely true! As it states in 1 Peter 2:9, “*but you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*”^{dxiii} Granted, the authors of 1 Peter and Hebrews are using this logic about the priesthood with an Israelite audience in mind – hence the phrase “*a chosen race*” – but they only do so because the concept of the priesthood would only have been significant to the Israelites. Gentiles would not have had much, if any, exposure to the Israelite priesthood, so a doctrinal argument about its relevancy to Christianity would likely not have interested the Gentiles. However, the logic that every believer in and manifester of the covenant truth and its implications is a priest of Yahweh is just as true of Gentile Christians as it is of Jewish Christians. We do not all literally minister in the Temple of God, but we are all priests in the sense that we believe in the covenant truth and its implications and are called by God to manifest both.

Hebrews 7:23-28

Many, indeed, have been made priests, because they are hindered from continuing by death. But he, because he lives forever, has his priesthood unchangeable. Therefore he is also able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, seeing that he lives forever to make intercession for them.

For such a high priest was fitting for us: holy, guiltless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; who doesn’t need, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices daily, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. For he did this once for all, when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men as high priests who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints a Son forever who has been perfected.

In this passage, the author describes the way in which Jesus is the best and permanent High Priest for people. Namely, the Temple sacrifices are meant to manifest the preexisting, inherent, permanent, and perfect righteousness of the people. However, the popular understanding of sacrifices among the Jews at the time is that they are deeds to practice in order to expiate sin, appease God’s wrath caused by your sin, and thus gain righteousness, rather than deeds that manifest the preexisting, inherent, permanent, and perfect righteousness of all people in our true identity despite the sins that we commit. Therefore, while the sacrifices were designed perfectly, the popular understanding of them is flawed. People erroneously consider sacrifices to be a

perpetually-necessary means of gaining and regaining righteousness that is fleeting and tenuous at best. Since the Levitical priests, all of whom are under the authority of the High Priest, administer these sacrifices that are misunderstood, they are not the most efficacious at manifesting the righteousness of the people. As the author puts it, “*the law appoints men as high priests who have weakness.*”

Contrariwise, Jesus is the fitting High Priest for us because He best manifests the permanence and perfection of our righteousness. Namely, He believed and taught that our true identity is permanently perfectly righteous because it is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. He did not communicate our righteousness through daily sacrifices in the Temple but through the one-time sacrifice of Himself that is forever efficacious in proving the accuracy of the covenant truth and its implications precisely because God resurrected Him from death and welcomed Him to eternal life with Him in Heaven. Therefore, Jesus “*lives forever*” and so serves as a permanent testimony to the covenant truth and its implications – i.e. He serves as a permanent High Priest. As the author of the Book of Hebrews puts it, Jesus “*has his priesthood unchangeable.*” Hence, the oath of Psalm 110:4 is fulfilled in Jesus, “*Yahweh has sworn, and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.’*” Accordingly, Jesus “*is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him*” and is able “*forever to make intercession for them*” because in His words, deeds, death, resurrection, and ascension, the covenant truth and its implications are both forever communicated and validated as being accurate. Put another way, through faith in Jesus Christ, we are confident that we have permanent perfect righteousness, and thus through faith in Jesus Christ, we have eternal life with God.

Through resurrection and ascension, God showed Jesus to be “*holy, guiltless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.*” In other words, in resurrection and ascension, God publicly validated Jesus’ belief in the permanent perfect righteousness of His and all other people’s permanent true identity in God. In death, Jesus was portrayed as a terrible sinner who is condemned by God, but in resurrection and ascension, God portrayed Him, and all the rest of humanity by extension, as being permanently perfectly honorable in His judgment and so figuratively “*made higher than the heavens*” – i.e. the most honorable out of all God’s works of Creation.

Indeed, we must be careful to not misunderstand the phrase “*holy, guiltless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.*” It does not mean that Jesus never committed a sin during His life nor that He is better than the rest of humanity. Rather, it simply means that God validated Jesus’ belief in the permanent perfect righteousness of His true identity, and that is something that God does for all believers in the covenant truth and its implications because both apply to all people. Indeed, Jesus, and any other believer in the covenant truth and its implications,

is “separated from sinners” only in the sense that an unrepentant sinner is somebody who believes that his sin accurately portrays his true identity as being sinful.

Similarly, we must be careful to not misunderstand the following two verses.

Hebrews 2:18

For in that he himself has suffered being tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.

Hebrews 4:15

For we don't have a high priest who can't be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but one who has been in all points tempted like we are, yet without sin.

The author's point is not that Jesus never committed a sin in His entire life nor that Jesus is better than the rest of humanity. Rather, Jesus is the One Whose words and example can best help us to have faith in the covenant truth and its implications despite all the temptations to disbelieve it. Jesus suffered more such temptations than most of us ever will, but at the end of His life, He stayed strong in His faith. While hanging on the cross, He experienced the greatest temptation to commit the sin of renouncing His faith in the covenant truth and its implications, yet He did not do so. That is the lack of sin to which the author refers. As a result of His faith that His true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and thus permanently perfectly righteous, Jesus is resurrected by God unto eternal life with Him, so Jesus is meant to be an inspiration to all of us to have that same faith so that we, too, have eternal life with God.

The Only Way to the Father

Faith in Jesus Christ is the only way for a person to have eternal life with God. As Jesus says in John 14:6, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me.*” “Life,” in this context, means honor. For the Near Easterner, life and honor are figuratively one and the same because honor is the prerequisite of meaningful existence.^{dxiv} More specifically, in this context, life refers to permanent perfect honor in the judgment of God – i.e. permanent perfect righteousness. The concept of coming to the Father refers to being able to stand in the presence of God because you have the boldness that results from your belief that you are permanently perfectly honorable in God's judgment. A man believes himself to have that permanent perfect righteousness – i.e. he “*comes to the Father*” – only through faith in Jesus Christ. Keep in mind

that in the Near East, the term “way,” can refer to the manner in which one thinks, speaks, behaves, worships, etc.^{dxv} In Jesus’ time and place, there were many “ways” available for a man to practice, such as those taught by the Pharisees, Sadducees, Samaritans, etc.^{dxvi} However, in John 14:6, Jesus makes the point that He – that is, belief in His teachings – is the only effective “way” to the Father – that is, to the belief in your permanent perfect righteousness.

Eternal life with God is the peace of mind that comes from believing that you are permanently perfectly righteous, so the concept of coming to the Father also means having eternal life with God. The justification for the words of John 14:6 is that in faith in Jesus Christ, we are best able to believe in our permanent true identity as God’s perfect image and likeness and the permanent perfect righteousness of it. Therefore, it is faith in Jesus Christ that yields eternal life to us. Put another way, faith in Jesus Christ is the “way” to eternal “life” because He best manifests the covenant “truth” and the permanent perfect righteousness that it yields to all people.

This is not to say that our true identity and the righteousness of it are not expressed elsewhere, for such expressions are found in the Old Testament, particularly in Genesis 1:26-27. Nor is this to say that there were not people who lived before Jesus that believed in the covenant truth and the permanent perfect righteousness that it yields and thus had eternal life. Such people existed, one of whom was Abraham. Jesus even says in John 8:56, “*Abraham rejoiced to see my day. He saw it and was glad.*” Jesus’ meaning is that Abraham, during his life, believed in the covenant truth and the permanent perfect righteousness that it yields just as much as Jesus believes and manifests both. However, in the many years between the time of Abraham and the time of Jesus, the Israelites had come to deeply misunderstand the Law of God to be a standard of righteousness that they must meet in order to gain righteousness, and they judged their righteousness by their public reputations for righteousness that resulted from their compliance with the commands of the Law of God. They stopped believing that humanity’s preexisting and permanent true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God and that we have preexisting, permanent, and perfect righteousness in our true identity as a result, regardless of our deeds.

It is only through faith in Jesus Christ that we are able to again believe in our permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God and the permanent perfect righteousness of it. Jesus was a man sentenced to the most painful and humiliating death for communicating that true identity and righteousness of all humanity. The popular religious scholars of the day considered that message to be blasphemy, yet God vindicated Jesus and His message by resurrecting Him and welcoming Him to Heaven. Jesus is the only way to the Father (i.e. to eternal life with God) because there is no clearer nor more authoritative corroboration of the covenant truth and the righteousness that it yields to all people than Jesus’ words, deeds, death, resurrection, and ascension. Jesus is the greatest refutation of Satan’s lies that we are not like God and thus not righteous.

You may have heard the adage, “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”^{dxvii} By the same token, we could say that “righteousness and eternal life with God by any other name would be just as sweet.” My meaning is that being confident that you are permanently perfectly righteous – i.e. permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God – is eternal life with God no matter how you arrive at that confidence. **In theory**, if your deeds in life are such that they give you that confidence, then you have eternal life with God. **In theory**, if your public reputation is such that it gives you that confidence, then you have eternal life with God. **In theory**, you can have that confidence and thus eternal life with God by believing only what is written in The Old Testament of the Bible, for the covenant truth and its implications are certainly contained in it. **In theory**, you can have eternal life with God through any means so long as those means cause you to be genuinely confident that you are permanently perfectly righteous.

However, those are only hypothetical situations that are not successful in practice. No man’s deeds in life or public reputation are so consistently good that they yield to him confidence that he is permanently perfectly righteous. Furthermore, the prominent Jewish scholars of Jesus’ time certainly knew the Old Testament of the Bible – i.e. the Tanakh – yet they did not believe in the permanent perfect righteousness of their true identity. Neither will jobs, relationships, other religions, etc. yield to you confidence that you are permanently perfectly righteous. Having eternal life with God is not a matter to be taken lightly, and each one of us needs to follow the way to eternal life with God that actually leads people to that outcome.

There is only one **effective** way of being confident that you are permanently perfectly righteous, and thus, there is only one **effective** way of having eternal life with God. Namely, that way is to have Christian faith, which is to believe the message that Jesus Christ manifested in His life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. His message, and the message of the Bible as a whole, is that all humanity has permanent perfect righteousness despite the sins that we commit. Specifically, we are permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity because our true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. This is also why I define eternal life more specifically as being confident that your true identity is permanently perfectly righteous because it is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. Judging your righteousness by anything other than that true identity will not yield to you confidence that you are permanently perfectly righteous.

Chapter 8: Communicating the Gospel to the Greco-Roman Audience

Jesus' resurrection and ascension are testimony that the collective identity of humanity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, in which there is no sinfulness because there is no sinfulness in God. Remember, Jesus referred to Himself as the Son of Man and the Son of God, and those titles imply that all sons of man – i.e. human beings – are sons of God.^{dxviii} In Jesus' resurrection and ascension, God testifies to the accuracy of Jesus' teachings and thus effectively expresses His preexisting and permanent definition of all humanity, namely that we are part of His collective as His perfect image and likeness in our permanent true identity and thus permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity. Therefore, Jesus' resurrection and ascension are very comforting to Near Easterners because they believe in collective and externally-determined identity. However, the Gospel is meant to be spread to all people, including those with different philosophies and psychologies than the Near Easterners.

Much of the New Testament after the Gospels is meant to translate the very Near Eastern Gospel message to the Greco-Roman philosophy and psychology, which are the foundation of modern Western philosophy and psychology. In New Testament times, Greco-Roman culture differs from Near Eastern culture, particularly in that it has a much greater sense of individuality. We see that individuality in the proliferation of many different philosophical schools of thought that a Greco-Roman man can choose from and apply to his life. Unlike for the Near Easterner, the Greco-Roman man is unconvinced by assertions of an externally-determined and shared true identity of humanity, even when it is manifested in the miraculous story of Jesus. Rather, that identity has to be proven by a logical argument in order to convince the Greco-Roman mind.^{dxix,dxx,dxxi} This is especially true because the portrayal of Jesus as having very righteous behavior makes it easy to falsely conclude that God resurrects Jesus only because of Jesus' righteous behavior. That conclusion is no comfort to any man who reflects upon his own life and has only his record of deeds upon which to judge himself, for every man's life proliferates with sin.

The apostle Paul addresses this very problem in Romans 7:7-25:

⁷ *What shall we say then? Is the law sin? May it never be! However, I wouldn't have known sin except through the law. For I wouldn't have known coveting unless the law had said, "You shall not covet."* ⁸ *But sin, finding occasion through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of coveting. For apart from the law, sin is dead.* ⁹ *I was alive apart from the law once, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.* ¹⁰ *The commandment which was for*

life, this I found to be for death;¹¹ for sin, finding occasion through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me.¹² Therefore the law indeed is holy, and the commandment holy, righteous, and good.

¹³ Did then that which is good become death to me? May it never be! But sin, that it might be shown to be sin, was producing death in me through that which is good; that through the commandment sin might become exceedingly sinful.¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am fleshly, sold under sin.¹⁵ For I don't understand what I am doing. For I don't practice what I desire to do; but what I hate, that I do.¹⁶ But if what I don't desire, that I do, I consent to the law that it is good.¹⁷ So now it is no more I that do it, but sin which dwells in me.¹⁸ For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwells no good thing. For desire is present with me, but I don't find it doing that which is good.¹⁹ For the good which I desire, I don't do; but the evil which I don't desire, that I practice.²⁰ But if what I don't desire, that I do, it is no more I that do it, but sin which dwells in me.²¹ I find then the law that, while I desire to do good, evil is present.²² For I delight in God's law after the inward person,²³ but I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members.²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me out of the body of this death?²⁵ I thank God through Jesus Christ, our Lord! So then with the mind, I myself serve God's law, but with the flesh, sin's law.

The Law of God is a tool of faith in our preexisting and permanent true identity as God's perfect image and likeness and the preexisting, permanent, and perfect righteousness of it, but the misinterpretation of the Law is that it is a standard by which we can make ourselves righteous. Furthermore, by that misinterpretation, we believe that we have no inherent righteousness and must instead gain righteousness through obedience to the Law. Failing to successfully execute that strategy, we feel condemned in our sins. However, in Christian faith, we are set free from the Law of God only in the sense that we are no longer burdened by those misconceptions. In other words, through believing the teachings of Jesus Christ, we know that we are permanently perfectly righteous in our permanent true identity and that the Law of God is only a tool to help us believe in that true identity and the righteousness of it. Nevertheless, some people may argue that if the Law can be misinterpreted and so lead a man to believe that he is condemned in his sins, then is the Law not sinful itself?

Paul answers vehemently in the negative. He writes that through the Law of God, you come to know which behaviors are sins, but the side effect of learning which behaviors are sins is your realization of the great multitude of occasions in which you have committed those sins. This is what Paul means in verse 8, “*but sin, finding occasion through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of coveting.*”^{dxxii} He does not mean that the commandment against coveting caused him to covet but, rather, that when he learned that coveting is a sin, he remembered all the times that he coveted in the past. To be clear, Paul surely learned the commandments of the Law of God from a young age, but he is using the implied metaphor of newly learning the commandments as a way of

describing the false conclusion that people often come to about themselves when they consider the Law of God, namely that they are condemned by God as a result of their sins.

Remembering all of his sins of coveting, Paul falsely concluded that he is totally sinful – that is, sinful in both true identity and empirical identity. In other words, Paul misinterpreted the Law of God to be an accusation of just how sinful he is rather than properly interpreting it as a testimony to his permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God and the permanent perfect righteousness of it. In verse 9, Paul writes, “*I was alive apart from the law once, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.*” He means that his false understanding of the Law of God led him to metaphorical, spiritual death, which was his conclusion that he is totally sinful – i.e. sinful in both empirical identity and true identity. That conclusion is a deception, for the true identity of every person is permanently perfectly righteous because it is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. As Paul writes, “*sin, finding occasion through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me.*”

Paul continues, “*Did then that which is good become death to me? May it never be! But sin, that it might be shown to be sin, was producing death in me through that which is good; that through the commandment sin might become exceedingly sinful.*” The spiritual death that sin worked in him through his false understanding of the Law of God was ultimately for God’s purpose, for it was a lesson to him that he must earnestly avoid sinning in order to not again experience that spiritual death.

“*For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am fleshly, sold under sin.*” The Law of God is spiritual in the sense that it is an expression of God’s Spirit about the true identity of humanity and a means by which you can express, maintain, and amplify your spirit when it matches God’s Spirit. Put another way, the Law of God is meant to be a tool of expressing, maintaining, and amplifying one’s belief – i.e. one’s spirit of belief – in humanity’s permanent true identity in God and the permanent perfect righteousness of it, both of which God always believes as well. Nevertheless, Paul still commits sins despite generally wanting to be obedient to the Law of God. Paul describes that circumstance as being “*sold under sin*” because by sinning, he does that which he generally does not want to do, much like a slave is often compelled to do things that he does not want to do. As Paul writes, “*For I don’t understand what I am doing. For I don’t practice what I desire to do; but what I hate, that I do.*”

However, Paul also makes the glorious deduction that “*if what I don’t desire, that I do, it is no more I that do it, but sin which dwells in me.*” Of course, Paul does not mean that your sins are literally involuntary and not your responsibility, but, rather, he is only trying to convey the distinction between your sins and your true identity. He portrays sin as being an entity that dwells

in you but nevertheless is distinct from you – i.e. your true identity. That depiction is akin to the concept that your sins are the product of your being deceived by evil into believing that your true identity is unlike God and dishonorable in His judgment.^{dxxiii} Paul’s phrasing can be a bit confusing here because he uses the word “sin” to refer to that deception which causes you to commit actions that are traditionally called “sins.” The deception is in you in the sense that you believe it and behave in accordance with it, but neither the deception nor the behavior that it motivates are accurate expressions of your true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God. Paul alludes to this deception and the behavior that it motivates where he writes, “*I don’t understand what I am doing.*” He knows the Law of God to be good and desires to follow it because he believes the covenant truth and its implications. Nevertheless, he illogically still transgresses the Law of God – i.e. he commits sins – because evil still intermittently succeeds in deceiving him into disbelieving the covenant truth and its implications.

According to Paul’s metaphor, your sins – i.e. those things that you do without generally desiring to do them – are a manifestation of the deception that evil works upon you – i.e. are a manifestation of the “sin” which dwells in you. Therefore, you should not conclude that your sins accurately express your true identity just as you would not conclude that a tumor accurately expresses the natural condition of your body. Tumors can be in your body, but they are not natural parts of your body. Tumors can cause terrible effects upon your body, but those effects do not define the natural condition of your body. Similarly, sins can certainly wreak havoc in your life and in the lives of those around you, but your sins do not prove or cause your true identity to be sinful.

What justifies Paul making the distinction between our deeds and our true identity? The Spirit of God about humanity as manifested by Jesus Christ! As Paul writes in Romans 7:24-8:1: “*What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me out of the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ, our Lord! So then with the mind, I myself serve God’s law, but with the flesh, sin’s law. There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who don’t walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.*” The phrase, which is translated as “*walk according to,*” has the figurative meaning here of having a sincere spirit – that is a sincere perspective – of yourself. Namely, if you have faith in Jesus Christ, then you have the Holy Spirit as your own spirit, which is to say that you believe, despite the sins that you have committed, that you are permanently perfectly righteous in your true identity. You believe in that righteousness because you believe that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. With that perspective in mind, you have eternal life with God, and you are thus delivered from condemnation.

Contrariwise, the man who walks according to the flesh is condemned. Walking according to the flesh refers to having the perspective that your true identity is defined by your deeds (i.e. the works of your flesh/body), and because you commit sins, you thus believe that your true identity is sinful.

The man with that perspective condemns himself solely because he does not believe in the permanent perfect righteousness of his true identity, and he disbelieves that righteousness because he does not believe that his true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God.

Is Sin Meaningless?

I have thoroughly explained the point that the true identity of humanity is permanently perfectly righteous because it is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and that, as a result, sin never accurately expresses our true identity nor changes it. Furthermore, I have described how faith in Jesus Christ sets us free from condemnation in our sins. Having learned these things, some people might object that I make sin meaningless and thus make sins permissible. This is totally false. Remember the purpose of the Law of God: it is a tool with which we express, maintain, and amplify our belief in our permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God and the implications of it, including the permanent perfect righteousness of it. The more that you obey the Law of God, the easier it is to stay strong in your belief in that true identity and righteousness.

Your sins do not accurately express nor change your true identity or the righteousness of it, but they surely do express, maintain, and amplify your disbelief in that true identity and righteousness. The more that you sin, the easier it is to keep being deceived that your true identity is unlike God and dishonorable in His judgment. Additionally, the more that you sin against other people, the harder it is for them to believe in their true identity in God and the righteousness of it.

Paul writes in Romans 6:15-23:

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Don't you know that when you present yourselves as servants and obey someone, you are the servants of whomever you obey, whether of sin to death, or of obedience to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, whereas you were bondservants of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were delivered. Being made free from sin, you became bondservants of righteousness.

I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh; for as you presented your members as servants to uncleanness and to wickedness upon wickedness, even so now present your members as servants to righteousness for sanctification. For when you were servants of sin, you were free from righteousness. What fruit then did you have at that time in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now, being made free from sin and having become servants of God, you have your fruit of

sanctification and the result of eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This passage can be alarming to the modern Western reader because our concept of servitude and slavery is entirely negative. We think of such a condition as being nothing but demeaning to the servant or slave, but the Near Eastern perspective is different. Namely, a servant or slave and his family become part of the collective of his master and his family. This is especially true if association between the two families exists for multiple generations. Being part of the collective of his master, the servant also shares the collective identity of his master,^{dxxiv} and it is to this circumstance that Paul refers in this passage. Paul uses the Near Eastern concept of servitude as an analogy – i.e. what he calls speaking “*in human terms*” – for this meaning.

Eternal life is being certain of your permanent perfect righteousness because you believe that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. Eternal condemnation (i.e. what Paul terms here as “*death*”) is disbelief in that righteousness and true identity. Paul’s point in this passage is that those outcomes – i.e. eternal life and eternal condemnation – are heavily influenced by your behavior because your behavior expresses, maintains, and amplifies your perspective of yourself. The more that you behave righteously (i.e. be a servant to righteousness), the easier it will be for you to continue to believe in your permanent true identity in God and the permanent perfect righteousness that it yields to you. The cultivation of that right perspective of yourself is the “*sanctification*” to which Paul refers where he writes “*present your members as servants to righteousness for sanctification.*” Contrariwise, the more that you behave sinfully (i.e. be a servant to sin), the easier it is for you to continue to disbelieve your true identity in God and the righteousness that it yields to you.

Paul writes, “*for the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” His point is that sin only amplifies your disbelief in your permanent perfect righteousness of true identity and thus yields condemnation, but the result of Christian faith, and by extension the righteous behavior that expresses, maintains, and amplifies that faith, is belief in your permanent perfect righteousness of true identity and thus eternal life. Significantly, Paul is careful to preclude an interpretation of works-righteousness from his words, for he specifies that eternal life is “*the free gift of God.*” Eternal life is certainty about your permanent perfect righteousness, and eternal life is a free gift from God because your permanent true identity in God that yields that righteousness was given to humanity freely by God at Creation. Eternal life is a free gift of God **in Christ Jesus our Lord** because it is through faith in Jesus Christ that we best know and believe our permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God and the permanent perfect righteousness of it.

Chapter 9: Sacraments

Overview

Sacraments are rituals that are meant to be expressions, maintenance, and amplifications of repentance, which is a change of mind unto belief in the covenant truth and its implications. I will describe two sacraments in particular: Baptism and Holy Communion. However, any ritual can be a sacrament if it helps you to express, maintain, and amplify your belief in the covenant truth and its implications, but only you can determine whether that goal is achieved in your practice of the ritual. Furthermore, just like the Law of God, the sacraments do not make you righteous. Rather, just as is true with obedience to the Law of God, you should only practice any sacrament because you have a *preexisting* belief that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and that its implications apply to you. By practicing a sacrament, you express, maintain, and amplify that belief. Ultimately, sacraments have the same purpose as the Law of God. Indeed, the sacrifices that are prescribed in God's Law have the same purpose as sacraments. Also, as I described in the section titled "Repentance and Atonement," atonement is a sensory manifestation of a spirit of repentance. Thus, sacraments also qualify as atonement.

Baptism

Baptism is the sacrament in which the participant is ritually cleansed with water. In the sacrament, you are meant to express your belief that your sins have been forgiven by God because your sins do not accurately express your permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God nor change it.^{dxxv} The nature of the ritual helps the participant to believe in that forgiveness all the more.

It is interesting to note that in the written Law of God, ritual cleansing with water is only used as a means of removing Levitical uncleanness rather than removing sins. As you will recall from the section titled "Cleanness and Uncleanness," Levitical uncleanness is similar to sin in that it is a spiritual state of disbelief in your righteousness, but it differs from sin in that it is not the result of moral transgressions but, rather, of some unavoidable circumstances of practical life. Accordingly, to the Israelite mind, Levitical uncleanness does not impute the stigma of humiliation to a person that is imputed by sin.

Nevertheless, in the Gospels, ritual cleansing with water – that is, baptism – is also used as a means of expressing, maintaining, and amplifying the participant’s belief in – or put another way, *acceptance of* – God’s forgiveness of his sins. By using a ritual that is reserved for removing Levitical uncleanness to express, maintain, and amplify belief in God’s preexisting forgiveness of all sins, the effect is to remove the humiliation of sin. The implication is that just as Levitical uncleanness should not be a source of humiliation, neither should sin be a source of humiliation. That impression conveyed by baptism makes perfect sense because sin does not accurately express our true identity nor change it, so we should not be humiliated by our sins when we repent of them. After all, if you know that your sins do not reflect your true nature, then why should you be humiliated by them? With the stigma of humiliation removed, it is much easier to believe in God’s preexisting forgiveness of all sins.

Furthermore, the distinction and incompatibility between sin and your true identity is emphasized in the baptism ritual because it portrays sin as being just as easily removed as Levitical uncleanness. Indeed, the sins are portrayed as simply being *washed off* of a person because they are on him – i.e. part of his behavior – but not part of his true identity. This depiction of the removal of sins makes it all the easier for the participant to believe that God has forgiven his sins.

Mark 16:16

He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who disbelieves will be condemned.

This verse has caused much confusion and misunderstanding among Christians because it seems to state that undergoing the ritual of baptism is required for salvation. Many people conclude from this verse that if a person dies without having been baptized, then he will be condemned no matter what is the state of his Christian faith. This conclusion is unequivocally false, for it contradicts the very concept of righteousness – and thus salvation – by faith alone.^{dxxvi} Why, then, does Jesus make the statement recorded in Mark 16:16? If salvation is a matter of only spirit – i.e. faith – then why does Jesus not simply say “He who believes will be saved; but he who disbelieves will be condemned?”

You must remember the audience to whom Jesus is speaking in the context of that verse: His remaining eleven apostles, whom He is sending out to preach His message to all people. Jesus’ point is that in order to be saved, people need to believe in the covenant truth and its implications, **such that they sincerely believe that their sins have been forgiven by God.** Your sincere belief in God’s forgiveness of your sins is salvation in the sense that it allows you to believe that your true

identity as the perfect image and likeness of God and the perfect righteousness of it are both permanent – i.e. are unaffected by your sins – and your belief in your permanent perfect righteousness of true identity is eternal life with God.^{dxxvii} The ritual of baptism, as described in the previous section, makes it easier for the participant to believe that his sins have been forgiven by God, but nevertheless, it is only the confident belief in the covenant truth and its implications that yields salvation, not the baptism ritual itself. In other words, Jesus commands baptism because it is a means by which a person can express, maintain, and amplify the belief that actually brings salvation.

However, we make the mistake of interpreting this verse as Jesus emphasizing the ritual of baptism as a requirement superseding “mere” faith. The reality is quite the opposite. Jesus is **de-emphasizing** the baptism ritual by clearly indicating that belief in the covenant truth and its implications is necessary for salvation. Namely, Jesus does not say “he who disbelieves **and is not baptized** will be condemned.” Rather, He simply states that “*he who disbelieves will be condemned*” precisely because it is only a man’s belief, or lack thereof, in the covenant truth and its implications that yields salvation or condemnation, respectively, **regardless of whether or not the man undergoes the ritual of baptism.**

Why does Jesus need to make this point? Because, His apostles will be going out to evangelize, and it will be much easier to persuade people to undergo a ritual than it will be to lead them to sincere faith in the covenant truth and its implications. Jesus is making it clear that the apostles cannot simply administer the baptism ritual while neglecting the goal of creating that faith in people. Indeed, the Bible provides examples of just the kind of “empty ritual” that Jesus is warning against. In Matthew 3:7-10, John the Baptist chastises the Pharisees and Sadducees for coming to him to be baptized because he knows that they do not come with a sincere spirit of repentance unto belief in the covenant truth and its implications. Additionally, in Acts 19:1-7, Paul encounters people who were baptized “*into John’s baptism*” but had not received the Holy Spirit and had never “*even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.*” In other words, they underwent a baptism of repentance, but they were not instructed in the belief that they were meant to repent unto. That is exactly the kind of situation that Jesus warns against in Mark 16:16.

Apropos of Jesus’ warning, there is a dispute among some Christian congregations as to whether or not infant baptisms are appropriate. Those who oppose infant baptisms argue that babies lack the intellectual capacity to understand the significance of the ritual and that the ritual thus becomes invalid. Those who support infant baptisms argue that the parents and other adult relatives of the infant will instruct him in the principles of Christian faith as he grows, so the ritual is valid in that way. Also, they point to Acts 16:33 because it describes an entire household being baptized, and that household may have had an infant among its number.

I personally believe that baptism should be performed only when the subject understands and believes the principles of Christianity, namely the covenant truth and its implications. However, I do not oppose the practice of infant baptism so long as all the adults involved clearly understand and firmly believe that the ritual itself does not convey salvation to the child. They must believe that only the child's future Christian faith will yield salvation to him, and they must commit to instructing him in that faith.

The Holy Trinity

In what Christians call "The Great Commission," Jesus commands His apostles saying "*go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I commanded you.*"^{dxxviii} The concept of "the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is what many Christians call "The Holy Trinity," and the phrase "*in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*" is called "the Trinitarian formula." Multiple obscure theories have been proposed over the last two thousand years to explain the concept of the Holy Trinity. However, the meaning of the phrase, "the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," is really not difficult to understand when you take into account the foregoing content of this book.

I have described the ritual of baptism as a means of expressing, maintaining, and amplifying your belief that God has forgiven your sins. Of course, the reason why God has forgiven your sins is because your permanent true identity is His perfect image and likeness, in which there is no sinfulness, and therefore, sin does not accurately express your true identity nor change it. Ultimately then, the ritual of baptism is not to be just an expression of belief in God's forgiveness of sins but also an expression of belief in the covenant truth and its implications, which include that forgiveness.

Also, in the Great Commission, the phrase "*all things that I commanded you*" refers not just to the orders that Jesus gave His disciples to follow but also to the things that Jesus taught them. The broad meaning and use of the word "*commanded*" is the result of the Near Eastern model of traditional education, in which the teacher presents information that the students then memorize and recite.^{dxxix,dxxx,dxxxii} Unlike in the modern Western model of education, in traditional Near Eastern education, there is no onus upon the teacher to convince his students of the validity of the information that he presents. Rather, he simply commands them to memorize and recite that information. Hence, teaching and commanding are equivalent concepts here.

As I describe in the section titled “The Name of God,” in the ancient Hebrew and Greek languages, the concept of a person’s name does not just refer to his appellation but also to his entire identity. In the Trinitarian formula of the Great Commission, the Father is Yahweh, God Almighty, Who is the Creator and Foundation of the covenant truth and its implications, for the covenant truth is that humanity’s permanent true identity, as designed by God, is the perfect image and likeness of God. The Son is Jesus Christ, Who is the best human representation and manifestation of that shared true identity of both humanity and God and its implications.^{dxxxii} The Holy Spirit is simply the unchanging perspective of God. It is the unchanging understanding that God has of all things. Specifically, the content of the Holy Spirit is the covenant truth and its implications, both of which God believes.

Putting this all together, the Great Commission makes perfect sense. Jesus knows and believes the covenant truth that all humanity has the true identity that is permanently God’s perfect image and likeness, and He knows and believes all the implications of that covenant truth. Thus, Jesus commands His apostles to go to all people, Jews and Gentiles, and make them disciples – i.e. students and believers^{dxxxiii} – of the covenant truth and its implications. Namely, He commands His apostles to educate people about the *names* (i.e. the identities) of Yahweh, Who is the Creator and Foundation of the covenant truth and its implications, Jesus, Who is the best human manifestation and representation of the covenant truth and its implications, and the Holy Spirit, which comprises the covenant truth and its implications.

The Definition of the Holy Spirit, Revisited

Some people may object that the Holy Spirit must be more than simply the perspective of God because the Bible describes those who have the Holy Spirit as doing miraculous things. For instance, Acts 2:4 states, “*they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other languages, as the Spirit gave them the ability to speak.*” The context of this verse is that Jesus has recently died, been resurrected, returned to the apostles for a period of forty days, and then ascended to Heaven. The apostles being “*filled with the Holy Spirit*” means that they have reinvigorated their belief in Jesus’ teachings despite the fact that He is no longer with them in bodily form. Since Jesus taught the covenant truth and its implications, both of which compose God’s perspective, believing Jesus’ teachings is to have the Holy Spirit as your own spirit.

Additionally, the apostles not only understand and sincerely believe the covenant truth and its implications but also desire to communicate both to other people, which is why they see (i.e. as a Yahweh-vision) flaming tongues and hear (i.e. as part of the Yahweh-vision) the sound of a mighty wind. The flaming tongues symbolize the irresistible desire to speak, like a man who must open his mouth to cool his burning tongue. The mighty wind further symbolizes the irresistible desire,

as if the apostles are driven forward by a strong gale. Because the apostles have the knowledge, faith, and desire to teach the covenant truth and its implications to others, God empowers them to speak in foreign languages that they presumably did not previously know, and that occurrence is undoubtedly a literal miracle. Communicating the covenant truth and its implications to other people is the theme of this passage in Acts chapter 2. However, where the verse states that “*the Spirit gave them the ability to speak*” those foreign languages, the meaning is simply that God empowers them to speak in those languages because they believe the covenant truth and its implications – that is, because they are “*filled with the Holy Spirit.*” Believing in the covenant truth and its implications, both of which apply to all people, the apostles naturally want to educate other people about both. In other words, God’s empowerment of the apostles is not the product of random selection, for God gave them the ability to speak in foreign languages because they will be good stewards of that miraculous ability. That is, they will use that fluency in other languages to communicate the covenant truth and its implications to other people, which is what God desires.^{dxxxiv} When you understand, believe, and desire to communicate the covenant truth and its implications – that is, when you make the Holy Spirit your own spirit – God often empowers you to do amazing, even miraculous things precisely because you seek to do His will.

In fact, sometimes God empowers people to do His will even if they seek to do it for the wrong reasons. Consider the example of Samson in Judges chapters 14-16. In that story, God is described as seeking an opportunity to afflict the Philistines, who ruled over the Israelites at that time.^{dxxxv} Samson is an Israelite man who is greatly governed by his lusts and passions. Particularly, he has an affinity for Philistine women, and his pursuit of them places him into conflict with Philistine men. God uses those conflicts as opportunities to bring hardship upon the Philistines through the efforts of Samson, and the Scripture describes two of those occasions with the phrase “*Yahweh’s Spirit came mightily on [Samson].*”^{dxxxvi} In other words, though Samson’s anger toward the Philistines has nothing to do with the covenant truth and its implications, because his anger is directed toward those whom God has a Mind/Spirit to send unpleasant corrective action upon, he has the Spirit of God as his own spirit to that limited extent. Because of that partial harmony between their spirits, God empowers Samuel to bring great hardship upon the Philistines.

Furthermore, having the Spirit of God also implies that you have the confidence that comes from being certain that your perspective is in accordance with God’s perspective. Though Samson has different motives than God, he is nevertheless confident that his affliction of the Philistines is in accordance with God’s Spirit because he believes that God considers them to be an enemy of the Israelites. That confidence emboldens him to deliver the affliction because he expects that God will empower him to do so. As another example, when Samuel anoints David as the king of Israel, the Scripture states that “*Yahweh’s Spirit came mightily on David from that day forward.*”^{dxxxvii} Samuel anoints David in the presence of his father and elder brothers, which implies that David is recognized as God’s chosen king by Samuel, who is an acknowledged prophet of God, and his family members, to whom David has shown deference for his entire life. Thus, the implication

here is that through the anointing, David gains confidence that he is God's chosen representative among the Israelites to do His will and exercise His authority. That confidence emboldens him to fill that role because he expects that God will empower him to be a good king.

In summary, there is a correlation between having the Holy Spirit as your own spirit and being able to do amazing things, but it would be wrong to characterize the Holy Spirit as a supernatural force or entity that directly bestows supernatural power upon you. Rather, God empowers you to do His will when you have a desire to do His will.

Holy Communion

Holy Communion is the sacrament in which Christians consume bread and wine with the understanding that the bread is symbolic of Jesus' body and that the wine is symbolic of Jesus' blood. The Biblical basis for this ritual comes from the Gospel descriptions of Jesus' last supper with His apostles. One such description is found in Luke 22:19-20:

He took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in memory of me." Likewise, he took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."

The purpose of this ritual is contained in the statement "*do this in memory of me.*" At the most basic level, the purpose of this ritual is for us to remember Jesus Christ. The natural next question is what exactly are we meant to remember about Jesus? We are meant to remember the covenant truth and its implications that He taught and manifested, and a shared meal is ideal for that recollection because in the Near East, a shared meal symbolizes a covenant between the participants.^{dxxxviii,dxxxix,dxl} Those eating with Jesus, either literally at the Last Supper or figuratively in their recollection of Him during Holy Communion, must remember and believe that all humanity, including Jesus, is part of the original covenant with Yahweh. We are meant to remember the permanent true identity of humanity as the perfect image and likeness of God and the implications of that true identity, including our permanent perfect righteousness of true identity and God's forgiveness of all our sins.

In the passage from Luke, Jesus makes reference to his body being broken and his blood being poured out, and those references are allusions to His upcoming suffering in crucifixion. Given that we are meant to remember the covenant truth and its implications, it makes perfect sense that Jesus wants us to recall His death, resurrection, and ascension because in that sequence of events, the

covenant truth and its implications are most clearly and miraculously proven. By resurrecting Jesus and later welcoming Him to Heaven, Yahweh supernaturally validates the covenant truth and its implications, both of which Jesus communicated, for God surely would not have glorified Jesus in those ways if Jesus' perspective and ministerial message were incorrect.

Jesus chooses the occasion of a meal for the apostles to remember Him and not only *a* meal but, by implication **every meal**. We can discern that Jesus intends for us to remember Him at every meal because in the passage, He instills symbolism to bread and wine, and in Roman Palestine, bread and wine would have been served at virtually every meal.^{dxi} We are meant to remember Jesus and His message about the covenant truth and its implications even as often as every meal because Satan spends every moment of our waking lives trying to deceive us into disbelieving both.

In the Holy Communion ritual, the participants eat the bread and drink the wine, so they symbolically consume the body and blood of Jesus as well. That consumption is a metaphor for the participant believing that his true identity is manifested by Jesus. According to the logic of the metaphor, you are to believe that the true identity of humanity that Jesus perfectly manifested and represented is *in* you just as much as you believe that the bread and wine that you have eaten – i.e. the figurative Jesus – is *in* you. Indeed, in the Near East as in the West, meals, like that in the last supper scene, are shared between family members or close friends – that is, between people who identify with each other.^{dxi} Hence, your consumption of the symbolic body and blood of Jesus Christ expresses, maintains, and amplifies your belief in your permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God and the implications of it. Also, recall that sacraments are forms of atonement because they express, maintain, and amplify a spirit of repentance unto belief in the covenant truth and its implications. Therefore, your participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion is an opportunity for you to express, maintain, and amplify that repentance.

Of course, one of the most important implications of the covenant truth is God's forgiveness of our sins, and our remembrance of that forgiveness is emphasized in Holy Communion. In the Last Supper narrative, as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says of the wine, "*for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the remission of sins.*"^{dxi} The pouring out of Jesus' blood is a reference to His crucifixion and subsequent resurrection and ascension, in which God supernaturally validates the covenant truth and its implications, both of which Jesus communicated to us. The covenant truth is that our true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, so as sinfulness is never part of God, it also is never part of our true identity. Therefore, sin, which is motivated by the erroneous belief that our true identity is sinful, does not accurately express our true identity nor change it. Thus, God surely has forgiven our sins. Since God validates the covenant truth in Jesus' resurrection and ascension, He therefore also validates, by implication, His forgiveness of our sins. Furthermore, Jesus communicated God's forgiveness of our sins during His ministry, so God resurrecting Him from death and later

welcoming Him to Heaven also directly manifests God's agreement with that message. Therefore, when we participate in Holy Communion, we also express, maintain, and amplify our belief in God's forgiveness of our sins.

Some Christian denominations believe that the body and blood of Jesus are not symbolic in this ritual but literal. They believe that in some way, the literal body and blood of Jesus is contained in the bread and wine consumed in the sacrament. This belief seems to come from a failure to recognize just how much figurative language is used by Near Eastern people and from the content of 1 Corinthians 11:29, where Paul writes, "*For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy way eats and drinks judgment to himself if he doesn't discern the Lord's body.*" The misunderstanding here comes from interpreting the phrase "*the Lord's body*" to be a literal reference. Quite to the contrary, when we read the surrounding context of that verse, it becomes apparent that Paul uses the phrase to refer to everyone in the congregation. In this context, "body" means a group of people,^{dxliv} so "*the Lord's body*" is the group of people gathered together at a feast because they are all followers of Jesus. More specifically, Paul means that the true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God, which is perfectly manifested by Jesus, applies equally to everyone in the congregation. He uses this metaphor because it provides stylistic beauty to his argument by virtue of its direct allusion to Jesus' words at the Last Supper, "*This is my body,*"^{dxlv} even though Jesus uses the word "body" there as a figurative reference to the upcoming crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of His anatomical body. In other words, Paul uses a play on words in 1 Corinthians 11:29.

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul writes about how some people in the Christian congregation at Corinth have formed exclusive groups, and those groups practice discrimination against each other. This discrimination includes unequal distribution of food at their communal feasts, at which they practice a form of Holy Communion. Such unequal distribution results from the members of each group believing that the members of the other groups are not like them – indeed, not as good or honorable as them. Certainly, in the Near East, it is not uncommon for priority in the quantity and quality of food and the timing of its distribution to be given to individuals of higher social status (i.e. men before women, guests and hosts before servants, etc.).^{dxlvi} Judging by Paul's writing, it seems that this practice prevails in Corinth as well.

Paul's criticism to the Corinthian congregation is that the ritual of Holy Communion is about expressing, maintaining, and amplifying your belief in Jesus' message that all humanity has the same true identity that is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. However, apparently not everyone in the congregation believes in that equality of true identity because some people are treated differently than others during the Holy Communion feast. Evidently, for some people in the congregation, they believe in the true identity that Jesus manifested, but they do not believe that it applies to everybody. That is, they do not "*discern the Lord's body*" in the significance of Holy

Communion. Again, the phrase “*the Lord’s body*” refers to all followers of Jesus, so Paul’s criticism is that some Corinthians do not believe that **all** followers of Jesus have the same true identity in God that Jesus manifested.

Paul’s point is that if you do not believe that **all** humanity has the same permanent true identity that is the perfect image and likeness of God, then you have completely missed the point of the Holy Communion ritual. To the extent that you do not believe **all** humanity to permanently be the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity, you bring “*judgment*” – that is, “condemnation” – upon yourself.^{dxlvii} Namely, if you do not believe **all** humanity to have that same true identity, for whatever reason, then you cannot be certain that you have it either. If you believe that anything of this life – i.e. deeds, living circumstances, reputation, etc. – can make a person no longer the perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity, then you cannot be certain that something in your life has not made, or will not in the future make, such a change to your true identity. You thus cannot be certain that God has forgiven your sins and that you are permanently perfectly righteous in your true identity. No man’s earthly life – i.e. empirical identity – is perfectly righteous, so if you do not believe your true identity to be permanently perfectly righteous, then you disbelieve yourself to have permanent perfect righteousness, and such a disbelief is eternal condemnation.

Chapter 10: Prayer

We often think of prayer as being the means by which we communicate our needs to God for Him to fulfill, but such a perspective makes the mistake of assuming that God needs us to inform Him of our needs. As Omnipotent and Omniscient God, Yahweh already knows what is best for us at all times, and because He loves us, He always gives us those things, according to His perfect will and wisdom. Thus, by definition, your prayers cannot cause God to give you things that He does not already plan to give you.

What, then, is the purpose of prayer if not to communicate our needs to God? Prayer is meant to be a tool of faith in our permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God and the implications of it. Put another way, the purpose of prayer is to express, maintain, and amplify your faith in the covenant truth and its implications, which is faith in God.^{dxlviii} The mechanism of prayer in fulfilling that purpose is to establish the mental connection between the things that you pray for and God's provision of those things. You are to pray to God with the bold expectation that He will fulfill your request. You have that expectation because you believe that God favors you, and you believe that God favors you because you believe that your permanent true identity is His perfect image and likeness – i.e. that you are permanently part of His collective. When God fulfills your prayer, He demonstrates His favor for you and thus validates your true identity in Him and the implications of it. Therefore, with every fulfilled prayer, the strength of your faith in the covenant truth and its implications is maintained and increased, which is to say that it becomes all the easier for you to believe that you are the perfect image and likeness of God in your permanent true identity and that all the implications of that true identity apply to you.

However, that strategy of prayer only works if we do pray to God for the things that we need and attribute to God the provision of those things once we receive them, all within the context of our belief in the covenant truth and its implications. After all, if you instead attribute the provision to luck or your own efforts, then the good things that God gives you do nothing to maintain or improve your faith in the covenant truth and its implications. Prayers of petition to receive some good thing or prayers of thanksgiving after having received some good thing both place your spirit in such a state that you commit to the conclusion that the good thing will come or has come only from God because He established and upholds the covenant truth and its implications. This is why even though your prayers cannot change God's perspective of what things are best for you nor His desire to give them to you, they can affect the timing of God's provision of those things. Namely, if the thing that you desire is in accordance with God's will, then He is likely to deliver it to you sooner if you pray for it than if you do not because the prayer indicates the readiness of your spirit to attribute the receipt to God based upon your belief in the covenant truth and its implications.

Indeed, Jesus says “*seek first God’s Kingdom and his righteousness; and all these things will be given to you as well.*”^{dxlix} That is, have the peace of mind that your true identity is permanent and perfect. Believe that you permanently possess the righteousness of God in your true identity because your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, and therefore, your true identity is equally as honorable in the judgment of God as He is. It is that spirit of faith that God seeks to maintain and strengthen by fulfilling your prayers to Him.

Moreover, Jesus says in Mark 11:24, “*Therefore I tell you, all things whatever you pray and ask for, believe that you have received them, and you shall have them.*” People sometimes misinterpret that statement to mean that God applies no wisdom in His fulfillment of your prayers, as if God will give you things that you desire, but which He knows are bad for you, simply because you ask for them. We know that is not Jesus’ meaning because we can compare the verse from Mark with Jesus’ words in Luke 11:9-13:

“I tell you, keep asking, and it will be given you. Keep seeking, and you will find. Keep knocking, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives. He who seeks finds. To him who knocks it will be opened.

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he won’t give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? Or if he asks for an egg, he won’t give him a scorpion, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

Clearly, then, when Jesus speaks about petitions in prayer, He means petitions for good things, and He believes that God only gives good things to people.

Jesus’ meaning in Mark 11:24 is that when you pray for something that God knows is good for you, He will give it to you if you have strong faith that He will do so because you believe that you are His perfect image and likeness in your permanent true identity. You must pray with the boldness of expectation that comes from sincere faith in the covenant truth and its implications because only prayers that are based on that faith fulfill God’s purpose for prayer, as previously described. Prayer is not really about the things that God gives you but, rather, your spirit of belief in the covenant truth and its implications. Therefore, God fulfills your prayers for things that He knows are good for you when those prayers are based upon that spirit.

Significantly, we know that this is Jesus’ meaning in Mark 11:24 because in the immediately following passage, He says “*Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against*

anyone; so that your Father, who is in heaven, may also forgive you your transgressions. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your transgressions.”^{dl} We have two issues with that passage. First, we know that God has already forgiven all the sins of all people. Second, we wonder what our forgiveness of other people has to do with God’s fulfillment of our prayers.

God’s forgiveness of all our sins is the result of His belief that sinfulness is never part of our permanent true identity in Him and that sin, therefore, never accurately expresses our true identity nor changes it. Accordingly, God’s forgiveness of all our sins is preexisting. The reference to God’s future forgiveness of sins in that verse is only an externalization of the personal perspective and perception that a man has when he does not forgive other people for their sins. Namely, as a result of his lack of forgiveness for others, the man doubts God’s forgiveness of his sins. If he persists in withholding his forgiveness for others, then the man will maintain or amplify his belief that God does not forgive his sins, but if he instead chooses to forgive the sins of others, then the man will have new or renewed belief that God has already, from the very beginning, forgiven all of his sins.

Jesus’ point is that if you do not forgive other people’s sins against you, then you must believe that sinfulness is part of their true identity and that sin has changed their true identity and accurately expresses it. Therefore, you must not believe that their true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, that they are thus permanently perfectly righteous in their true identity, and that God has forgiven their sins because of their true identity. Furthermore, if you deny those things about them because of their sins, then you cannot be certain that those things apply to you because you sin as well. This is why Jesus speaks of forgiveness in relation to effective prayer, for you cannot believe in the covenant truth and its implications unless you believe that both apply to **all** people. Accordingly, you cannot pray with the boldness of expectation that comes from belief in the covenant truth and its implications if you do not believe that both apply to **all** people.

Of course, you can also pray for the benefit of other people, but the same principle applies. Namely, both you and the other person must have firm belief in the covenant truth and its implications. Assuming that your request is for something that God knows is good for that person, He will fulfill your prayer for the purpose of maintaining and strengthening the faith of both you and the other person in the covenant truth and its implications.

The Lord's Prayer

Jesus created a prayer, which Christians refer to as “The Lord’s Prayer,” as an example of the kind of prayer that is effective for strengthening our faith in our permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God and the implications of it. Just before describing this prayer, Jesus references the fact that God already knows what we need regardless of our petitions in prayer.

In praying, don't use vain repetitions as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their much speaking. Therefore don't be like them, for your Father knows what things you need before you ask him.^{dli}

Thus, Jesus instructs His disciples in a simple prayer with relatively vague petitions because the point of the prayer is to express, maintain, and improve our belief in the covenant truth and its implications, which is faith in God,^{dlii} rather than to request specific gifts from God. However, while the petitions are vague, they are nevertheless uttered with full confidence, which is clearly expressed in the grammar of the original Greek language used in the prayer. Namely, all of the verbs used in the direct petitions, with one exception described below for line 7, are conjugated in the imperative mood, which is the grammatical mood used for expressing commands.^{dliii} Obviously though, we do not command God to do things as if we give Him orders, but the imperative mood is still appropriate here because it is a mood that expresses great confidence that the request being made will be fulfilled.^{dliii}

I think it is instructive to examine this prayer line-by-line. I have numbered the lines sequentially for easy reference.

- 1 “Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy.
- 2 Let your Kingdom come.
- 3 Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
- 4 Give us today our daily bread.
- 5 Forgive us our debts,
- 6 as we also forgive our debtors.
- 7 Bring us not into temptation,
- 8 but deliver us from the evil one.
- 9 For yours is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”^{dlv}

In Line 1, the phrase “Our Father in heaven” is the petitioner’s expression of his belief that he is a son of God and thus part of God’s collective – i.e. he is the perfect image and likeness of God in

his permanent true identity. Furthermore, by characterizing God as being “*in heaven*,” the petitioner expresses his belief in the supreme strength and honor of God, for a high place symbolizes a position of strength and thus honor.^{dlii} To the ancient Israelite mind, the sky – i.e. the heavens – is the highest position possible.

The petitioner also says, “*may your name be kept holy*.” The holiness of God to humanity is that He is the sole and permanent foundation and substance of our permanent true identity.^{dliii} Put another way, God’s identity – i.e. His name^{dliii} – is holy to us because it is our permanent true identity as well, and we believe in that holiness of God when we believe in our true identity in God. In other words, the petitioner believes himself to be the perfect image and likeness of God in his permanent true identity, and he wants God to validate that true identity by fulfilling the petitions in the prayer. After all, God will fulfill the requests made to Him by His collective members for things that He knows are good for them, just as an earthly Near Eastern father would do for his children – i.e. the members of his collective. The petitioner will attribute to God the fulfillment of those petitions, and he will consider them to be God’s validation of his permanent true identity as God’s perfect image and likeness – i.e. as validation of his permanent membership in God’s collective. With the petitioner’s true identity in God having been so validated, his belief in God’s holiness to him will be maintained and increased.

Line 2 contains the phrase “*Let your Kingdom come*.” Entering or dwelling in God’s Kingdom – i.e. having it come upon you – is a metaphor for having peace of mind about your righteousness,^{dlix} and peace of mind about your righteousness comes from believing in the permanent perfect righteousness that you have in your permanent true identity in God. As the fulfillment of the petitions in this prayer will validate the petitioner’s permanent true identity in God, it will also maintain and increase his belief in his permanent perfect righteousness. That is, the fulfillment of the petitions will cause the Kingdom of God to come upon the petitioner all the more.

Lines 3-8 detail the petitions that the petitioner has for God. God’s will is to assist, provision, protect, and forgive us because He knows that we are permanently His perfect image and likeness in our true identity – i.e. permanently part of His collective. The petitioner asks God to execute His will on earth just as He executes it in Heaven. In other words, God dwells in Heaven, where the execution of His will is not stopped by evil because God is present to enforce His will. Given the imperative mood of the original Greek grammar here, the petitioner’s meaning is that God surely will execute and enforce His will on earth just as perfectly as He does in Heaven, and evil will not stop Him (line 3). Accordingly, the petitioner asks and confidently expects God to fulfill His material needs, which are referred to with a broad interpretation of “*daily bread*” (line 4).

Lines 5 and 6 include the petitioner's request for God's forgiveness of his sins. Some people might argue that Jesus' phrasing in this petition implies that God's forgiveness of sins is not preexisting and comprehensive but rather comes to a man incrementally. This is not Jesus' intended meaning. Rather, He simply conveys the impression that God's preexisting forgiveness of all sins is perceived anew by a man as, when, and to the extent that he forgives other people's sins against him.

Namely, the petitioner will be certain of God's preexisting forgiveness of all his sins when he forgives the sins that other people commit against him. Jesus elaborates on this point immediately after the conclusion of the prayer where He says "*For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you don't forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*"^{dix} Jesus thus emphasizes the necessity of forgiving others in order to be certain about God's forgiveness of your sins. I describe this concept in detail in the previous section. The more that the petitioner believes that God has forgiven all his sins, the easier it is for him to believe in his permanent true identity as God's perfect image and likeness, for God would not forgive his sins if they accurately expressed his true identity or changed it from its original design by God.

Significantly, the use of the word "*debts*" seems odd on first read, but it is simply an allusion to God's protection of and provision for the petitioner, including the fulfillment of his requests in this prayer. Jesus' point is that God unfailingly honors us by providing for our needs, but we fail to reciprocate that honor with full obedience of His commands. Thus, from the Near Eastern perspective of the importance of reciprocation, we have an outstanding "debt" of honor to God. Nevertheless, because we are part of His collective, God has forgiven our sins – i.e. those "*debts*" of honor – and we can most easily believe in that forgiveness from God when we forgive the sins that other people commit against us – i.e. the occasions in which they do not reciprocate the honor that we show them.

Furthermore, the petitioner asks God to prevent him from experiencing the temptation from evil to sin and to deliver him from the effects of sin (lines 7-8). As mentioned previously, the petition in line 7 does contain a verb that is not conjugated in the imperative mood. Namely, the phrase "*bring us not into temptation*" is conjugated in the subjunctive mood while the phrase "*deliver us from the evil one*" is conjugated in the imperative mood. The subjunctive mood expresses less confidence in the stated outcome than does the imperative mood.^{dlix,dlxii} Jesus uses the subjunctive mood in the former phrase because God does sometimes allow us to be tempted by evil, and Jesus uses the phrasing of asking God to not bring us into temptation because by the principle of divine fatalism,^{dlxiii} nothing can happen outside of God's will. Contrariwise, Jesus uses the imperative mood in the latter phrase because God always delivers us, in the ways and timing that He knows are best, from the calamitous effects that occur when we succumb to the temptations from evil.^{dlixiv}

Line 9 is the conclusion and summary for the prayer. The petitioner wants God to fulfill his requests in the prayer because to God belongs “*the Kingdom, the power, and the glory forever.*” In other words, the petitioner wants God to validate his permanent true identity in Him by fulfilling the requests in the prayer because it is only through his true identity in God that the petitioner can have permanent peace of mind about his righteousness – i.e. permanently dwell in “*the Kingdom [of God].*” That peace of mind about his righteousness is peace of mind that in his true identity, he has the strength (i.e. “*the power*”) of God and, thus, the honor (i.e. “*the glory*”) that is permanently perfect in the judgment of God.

Finally, Jesus ends the prayer with “*Amen,*” which means “so be it.”^{dlxv}

Chapter 11: Miracles

Definition

Miracles are supernatural blessings from God. Their purpose is to be a tool of faith in our permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God and the implications of it. A Near Eastern man assists the people in his collective, so all the more so, God assists the people in His collective. When God works a miracle for or through a person, He demonstrates that the person is part of His collective as His perfect image and likeness his true identity and that the implications of that true identity apply to him as well.

The nature of miracles as validation of a man's true identity in God is clearly indicated in Exodus chapter 4, in which Yahweh instructs Moses to perform multiple miracles in the sight of the Israelites, whom Moses must convince to follow him out of Egypt and into the Promised Land of Canaan. Referring to the miracles, Yahweh says to Moses, "*This is so that they may believe that Yahweh, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.*"^{lxvi} In other words, the miracles are meant to prove to all spectators that Moses has the support and endorsement of Yahweh. Furthermore, the miracles that Jesus performs in the Gospels prove the same thing about Him. More specifically, they serve as proof that Jesus is the Messiah. By Near Eastern cultural standards, God would not demonstrate His support for and endorsement of a man unless He considers that man to be part of His collective.

Despite the fact that miracles are validation of our true identity in God and the implications of it, we must not interpret the presence or absence of miracles to be the definitive proof that we do or do not, respectively, possess both. Jesus alludes to this concept in John 14:8-11:

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us."

Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you such a long time, and do you not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father. How do you say, 'Show us the Father?' Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? The words that I tell you, I speak not from myself; but the Father who lives in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me; or else believe me for the very works' sake.

Philip wants a miracle from Jesus in which Jesus literally shows God – that is, the sight of Him – to the disciples to prove God’s support for Him and the disciples. Jesus replies that throughout His entire ministry, He has shown God to all His followers in the sense that He has manifested God’s Spirit in His words and deeds. Furthermore, God has validated Jesus’ message by empowering Him to work many miracles. In other words, because of all that he has seen and heard from Jesus, Philip should already believe that Jesus’ teachings are accurate expressions of God’s Perspective. That is, Philip should believe that when he hears Jesus speak, he hears the words of God, and when he sees Jesus’ behavior, he sees God’s work done.

Then Jesus says, “*Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me; or else believe me for the very works’ sake.*” In that sentence, “works” refers to the miracles that God empowers Jesus to perform and which are God’s validation of Jesus as His Son, Messiah, and Representative of His Spirit. Later in the Gospel story, Jesus makes a similar statement to Thomas, who had previously said to the other disciples that he must touch Jesus’ wounds before he will believe in Jesus’ resurrection from death and, by implication, in God’s validation of Jesus’ teachings. After Jesus miraculously complies with his demand, He says to Thomas, “*Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.*”^{dlxvii} From both of those passages, it is clear that Jesus considers faith in Him that is based upon miracles to be less than ideal.

It is perfectly fine to *become* convinced of Jesus’ teachings because He worked miracles and experienced the miracles of being resurrected and later ascending to Heaven. Furthermore, it is perfectly fine to *become* convinced of the covenant truth and its implications when you recognize God’s miraculous work in your own life. However, once you are so convinced, you cannot allow your faith to vary with the presence or absence of further miracles. If your faith does vary in that way, then you will never have peace of mind that your true identity is permanently perfectly righteous because you will never be certain that it is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. Thus, you will never have eternal life with God. That peace of mind and eternal life with God are Jesus’ meaning in the statement “*Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.*” In other words, you should have faith in Jesus not because of His miracles, resurrection, and ascension but, rather, because you understand and believe the Spirit of God – namely, the covenant truth and its implications – and recognize that Jesus’ words, deeds, death, resurrection, and ascension accord with and express that Spirit. Furthermore, you should believe in your permanent true identity in God and the implications of it even when the work of God – i.e. His miracles – are not readily apparent.

Boldness of Faith

Matthew 17:14-21

When they came to the multitude, a man came to him, kneeling down to him and saying, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is epileptic and suffers grievously; for he often falls into the fire, and often into the water. So I brought him to your disciples, and they could not cure him.”

Jesus answered, “Faithless and perverse generation! How long will I be with you? How long will I bear with you? Bring him here to me.” Jesus rebuked the demon, and it went out of him, and the boy was cured from that hour.

Then the disciples came to Jesus privately, and said, “Why weren’t we able to cast it out?”

He said to them, “Because of your unbelief. For most certainly I tell you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will tell this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. But this kind doesn’t go out except by prayer and fasting.”

In this passage, Jesus identifies the disciples' lack of belief as the reason why they could not perform the miracle of exorcising a demon, and He goes on to say that faith will yield spectacular miracles. Jesus' meaning is that belief in His teachings, which is to say belief in the covenant truth and its implications, will yield spectacular miracles. Also in Matthew 9:27-30, Jesus connects the receipt of a miracle with faith.

As Jesus passed by from there, two blind men followed him, calling out and saying, “Have mercy on us, son of David!” When he had come into the house, the blind men came to him. Jesus said to them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?”

They told him, “Yes, Lord.”

Then he touched their eyes, saying, “According to your faith be it done to you.” Then their eyes were opened. [...]

The faith that the blind men have in Jesus is faith that Jesus' teachings about the covenant truth and its implications accurately express God's Spirit. Therefore, they also believe that God empowers

Jesus to work miracles in furtherance of the goal of convincing people of the covenant truth and its implications.

Remember, just like with prayers, the purpose of miracles is to be a tool of faith in our permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God and the implications of it. Just as effective prayers are those uttered with the boldness of expectation that God will fulfill them, so too are effective attempts at working and/or obtaining miracles based upon the bold expectation that God will respond as desired. That boldness of expectation comes from your sincere belief that God favors you because you are part of His collective as His perfect image and likeness in your permanent true identity. When God does empower you to work a miracle or when He works a miracle for you, He validates those beliefs, and that validation maintains or strengthens those beliefs in you. If God were to work miracles through and/or for people who do not have those beliefs, then the miracles would not serve their purpose of validating and maintaining or strengthening such beliefs. Hence, God sometimes does not work miracles for those or through those who do not have strong faith in the covenant truth and its implications.

In Matthew chapter 9, the blind men are healed “*according to [their] faith*” in the sense that they believe in the covenant truth and its implications, as taught by Jesus, and God delivers the miracle in order to corroborate the accuracy of their belief. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus uses the statement “*your faith has saved you,*” or some other variation on that phrasing, to convey the same meaning.^{dlxviii} Furthermore, God works the miracle of healing the blind men **through Jesus** because Jesus believes in the covenant truth and its implications, and God’s choice to work the miracle through Him corroborates the accuracy of His belief as well.

In Matthew chapter 17, Jesus describes the disciples as being unable to exorcise the demon because they do not have sincere faith in the covenant truth and its implications. That is why Jesus expresses frustration when He says, “*Faithless and perverse generation! How long will I be with you? How long will I bear with you?*” He is frustrated with His disciples because they have been with Him for an extended period of time, heard His teachings, and seen His miracles. Therefore, they should have strong faith in the covenant truth and its implications, yet their failure to exorcise the demon indicates that they do not have such strong faith.

This is also why Jesus later advises the disciples to practice prayer and fasting before attempting further miracles. As described in chapter 10 of this book, in prayer you request things of God based upon your faith in the covenant truth and its implications, which is faith in God.^{dlxix} Specifically in this context, the request in prayer would be the disciples’ request that God empower them to work a miracle. Fasting is also a tool of improving your faith in the covenant truth and its implications because it eliminates some distractions in your life. Namely, most meals in the Near

East are taken in the company of many people who use the occasion for socializing. If a man is fasting, he does not participate in those meals nor that socializing, so he can focus upon his thoughts. That is, he can focus upon pondering Jesus' teachings, the logic of them, the Scripture supporting them, and the miracles of Jesus that validate them. Thus, both prayer and fasting will focus the disciples' thoughts upon their belief in the covenant truth and its implications, and they will consider the forthcoming miracle to be God's validation of both. Therefore, prayer and fasting create a circumstance in which God's purpose for working a miracle can be achieved, so God is more likely to empower the disciples to work a miracle subsequent to them praying and fasting.

God's Will Be Done

One stumbling block that Christians struggle with in the concepts of faith and miracles is that most of us have had occasions in our lives in which we asked God for something, believed that He would provide it, but then God did not fulfill the request. This failure seems to contradict Jesus' teaching that effective attempts to work or obtain miracles are based upon the bold expectation that God will deliver a miracle. Certainly, even if you ask God for a miracle with the certainty that He favors you because you are His perfect image and likeness in your permanent true identity, you still may not receive that miracle. Indeed, all of Jesus' teachings about miracles include the explicit or implicit disclaimer that God will only ever act in accordance with His will. More specifically, God will only ever do the things that He knows are good for us. If you ask God for something that you think would be good for you but that He knows would actually be bad for you and/or for another person, then God will not fulfill that request. Yahweh is our loving Father, not a genie who grants any wish simply because you utter it. As Jesus says in Matthew 7:7-11:

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives. He who seeks finds. To him who knocks it will be opened. Or who is there among you who, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, who will give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

If we, as human beings with often corrupted spirits (what Jesus calls here "being evil"), have the love and wisdom to give our children only that which we know is good for them, then why would we expect any less from Yahweh, Who always has a Spirit of perfect belief in the covenant truth and its implications?

The disclaimer about God's fulfillment of requests being subject to His perfect will and wisdom is often unspoken by Jesus simply because His Near Eastern audience instinctively understands that

disclaimer to apply in all things. Remember from the section titled “Divine Fatalism” that the Near Easterner has a strong belief that whatever does happen must be in accordance with the will of God. As a result of his belief in divine fatalism, the Near Easterner readily submits to the will of God in all things. That submission is all the more embraced by Jesus’ followers, for He teaches the covenant truth and its implications, including God’s favor for all people. They readily submit to God’s will because they know from Jesus how much God loves them and judges them to be honorable as His perfect image and likeness in their permanent true identity. After all, since a Near Eastern man does things to benefit the members of his collective, God will do no less for the members of His collective.

Mark 11:12-14; 19-24

¹² *The next day, when they had come out from Bethany, he was hungry. ¹³ Seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, he came to see if perhaps he might find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ Jesus told it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again!” and his disciples heard it.*

¹⁹ *When evening came, he went out of the city. ²⁰ As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away from the roots. ²¹ Peter, remembering, said to him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered away.”*

²² *Jesus answered them, “Have faith in God. ²³ For most certainly I tell you, whoever may tell this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ and doesn’t doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is happening, he shall have whatever he says. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, all things whatever you pray and ask for, believe that you have received them, and you shall have them.*

In this passage, Jesus alludes to the caveat that your requests of God have to be in accordance with His will in order for Him to grant them. Jesus is hungry and goes to gather figs from a tree. We can assume that Jesus expects Yahweh to miraculously provide the figs because the Gospel writer tells us that this “*was not the season for figs.*” Jesus gets to the tree and finds no figs, so we can discern that even for Jesus, Yahweh will not fulfill a desire that is contrary to His will. The passage does not indicate why God does not deem it best to provide Jesus with figs in that moment, but the reason does not matter because the point of the story is that God will only ever act in accordance with His own will.

Jesus responds to this failure to find figs by cursing the tree: “*May no one ever eat fruit from you again!*” However, Jesus does not say this in anger. Rather, Jesus curses the tree as an expression of His enthusiastic and earnest submission to Yahweh’s will. To paraphrase Jesus, “If Yahweh does

not want me to have figs from this tree, then **all the more so**, let His will be done by this tree never bearing figs ever again.”

The tree is later found to have withered, in accordance with Jesus’ curse of it. Therefore, it must have been God’s will that the tree wither. Jesus then tells His disciples to have faith in God that God will do even big, wondrous things that they desire. Remember, faith in God is faith in the covenant truth and its implications. Jesus tells them to have the boldness of faith such that they consider their requests to already be fulfilled before they even see the fulfillment. In other words, they should consider the fulfillment of their requests to be forgone conclusions because they are certain of their true identity in God and the implications of it and because they believe that their requests are in accordance with both.

Therefore, this story expresses important concepts about miracles. First, we must only request miracles that we believe are in accordance with the covenant truth and its implications. Second, we must boldly expect the miracles that we request because we have faith in the covenant truth and its implications. Third, while our desires are many, God only works miracles that are in accordance with His wisdom and will. Fourth, when God does not deliver a miracle that you requested, you should respond, as Jesus did, with enthusiastic and earnest submission to the will of God because His denial of your request is part of Him upholding the covenant truth and its implications by protecting your well-being and/or the well-being of another person.

John 16:23

[...] Most certainly I tell you, whatever you may ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.

In that verse, and in others which express the same concept of asking for things in the name of Jesus, it seems like Jesus gives a very clear formula for guaranteeing that God will fulfill any request that we make. Remember, though, that the concept of a name in ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek does not just refer to somebody’s appellation but also to his entire identity.^{dlxx} Thus, to ask for something in the name of Jesus means to ask for it within the context of your belief in Jesus’ teachings. Jesus taught the covenant truth and its implications. Therefore, we must ask only for things that accord with both, and we must boldly expect to receive those things because we have faith in both. Additionally, as described previously, part of believing the covenant truth and its implications is believing that God will only ever do what He knows is best for all people. Accordingly, following Jesus’ example, we must enthusiastically and earnestly submit to God’s will even when it contradicts our desires in the moment.

Chapter 12: Eschatology

Eschatology is “the part of theology [...] that deals with death or the end of the world.”^{dlxxi} Accordingly, this topic covers the next life both for the individual and the world as a whole. All the elements of Biblical eschatological descriptions can be interpreted literally, figuratively, or a mixture of both, but I am going to focus primarily upon the figurative interpretations for two reasons. First, Near Eastern writers and speakers use much figurative language to convey their meanings. Second, even if every aspect of Biblical eschatology is to be a literal, sensory occurrence, those aspects do still have figurative, doctrinal meaning that we need to understand. However, none of what I write here should be interpreted as an invalidation or rejection of a literal interpretation of any piece of Biblical eschatology.

The literal events of Biblical eschatology, to the extent that they are meant to be interpreted literally, have value for us in the time in which they occur, but I focus upon the figurative, doctrinal interpretations of those events because they have value for us now and forever. Admittedly, one could write an entire book describing just the eschatological content of the Bible, but the fundamental, figurative, and doctrinal eschatological meaning of the Bible does not require a particularly lengthy exposition.

In 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, the apostle Paul provides a comparatively succinct eschatological summary:

But now Christ has been raised from the dead. He became the first fruit of those who are asleep. For since death came by man, the resurrection of the dead also came by man. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then those who are Christ's at his coming. Then the end comes, when he will deliver up the Kingdom to God the Father, when he will have abolished all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. For, “He put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when he says, “All things are put in subjection,” it is evident that he is excepted who subjected all things to him. When all things have been subjected to him, then the Son will also himself be subjected to him who subjected all things to him, that God may be all in all.

The figurative meaning in this passage is that faith in Jesus Christ yields peace of mind about your righteousness because in that faith, you believe that your permanent true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God and thus permanently perfectly righteous. Please understand that Paul uses some double meanings here. The words “*dead*,” “*death*,” and “*die*” refer to both bodily death and the spiritual corruption that is believing that humanity is fundamentally unlike God and dishonorable in His judgment in our true identity. That spiritual corruption has been the experience of every human being since and including the first man, Adam. Being “*asleep*” refers to having that spiritual corruption. “*Made alive*” refers both to bodily resurrection unto eternal life with God and to the spiritual awakening unto belief in the covenant truth and the righteousness that it conveys to all people. The coming of Christ is both a reference to Jesus’ bodily resurrection after death and to a person’s belief in the teachings of Jesus Christ, teachings which are most clearly validated by God’s resurrection of Jesus.

With those meanings in mind, we can interpret the passage properly. Jesus was, hyperbolically speaking, the first person (i.e. “*the first fruits*”) among deceived humanity (i.e. “*those who are asleep*”) to escape the spiritual corruption and instead believe the covenant truth that humanity’s permanent true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God and that we are permanently perfectly righteous in our true identity as a result. I specify “hyperbolically” because there were other people throughout history who knew that covenant truth and its implications, including Abraham, Moses, and John the Baptist. Much like Jesus calling Himself “*the only born Son of God*,”^{dlxxii} Paul calls Jesus “*the first fruits*” simply to emphasize that He was one of the few people of the past to know and believe the covenant truth and its implications.^{dlxxiii} Additionally, He is “*the first fruits*” in the sense of being the founder of Christianity, which is the system of belief that is best capable of leading people to believe the covenant truth and its implications.

The covenant truth and its implications, which Jesus believed, preached, and manifested, has spread and will continue to spread to other people as those people come to believe in His teachings – i.e. they are “*those who are Christ’s at His coming*. ” The “*coming*” refers to a man’s discovery of the teachings of Jesus, and if that man believes those teachings, then he will be Christ’s – that is, one of Jesus’ followers. In his Christian faith, the believer is metaphorically “*made alive*” in the sense that he believes himself to have permanent perfect righteousness – that is, permanent perfect honor in the judgment of God – in his true identity because he believes that he is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity. Remember that life, and thus being “*made alive*, ” is a symbol of honor, and the greatest honor possible is honor in the judgment of God.^{dlxxiv}

The description of all things being in subjection to God refers to the victory and vindication of the covenant truth and its implications, which God established and upholds. All enemies of the covenant truth and its implications – i.e. “*all rule and all authority and power*” – will be rendered meaningless – i.e. “*abolished*” – in the minds of those who have Christian faith. In their faith,

Christians will believe that God permanently defines them as His perfect image and likeness in their true identity, and thus, they will also believe that they are permanently perfectly righteous in their true identity. Therefore, all people and things – i.e. “*all rule and all authority and power*” and even “*death*” – which claim or imply that a man does not have that true identity and righteousness will be rendered meaningless in the mind of the man who has Christian faith.

This faith in the teachings of Jesus Christ will yield to His followers peace of mind that they are permanently perfectly righteous in their true identity. As Paul puts it, Jesus “*will deliver up the Kingdom to God the Father.*” That is, the metaphorical Kingdom which Jesus filled with His followers will be delivered to Yahweh in the sense that Jesus’ followers will know that Yahweh judges them to be permanently perfectly honorable in their true identity. Remember, the concept of entering or dwelling in the Kingdom of God is a metaphor for having peace of mind about your righteousness, namely peace of mind that your true identity is permanently perfectly righteous. That peace of mind is based upon the belief that all humanity’s permanent true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, or put another way, it is the belief that God is “*all in all*” people.

This final, lasting peace of mind about one’s righteousness cannot come to any man until that man realizes and believes, through Christian faith, that nothing matters except the covenant truth and its implications, or as Paul puts it, Christ “*must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.*” That reign of Christ is a spiritual reign. Namely, Christ reigns in the spirit of a man when that man has faith in His teachings. This spiritual state in a man is Paul’s meaning where he writes, “*when all things have been subjected to him* [i.e. Jesus], *then the Son will also himself be subjected to him* [i.e. God] *who subjected all things to him* [i.e. Jesus], *that God may be all in all.*” In other words, a man of Christian faith believes Jesus’ teachings about the covenant truth and its implications. The spiritual reign of Christ – i.e. the Christian man’s subjection to Him – is metaphorically transferred to God in the sense that faith in Jesus Christ is faith that God has made all humanity His perfect image and likeness in our true identity, or as Paul puts it, God is “*all in all.*” This spiritual state is “*the end*” for the man who has Christian faith because in that faith, he has eternal life with God, which is peace of mind that he is permanently perfectly righteous in his true identity, as I will describe in greater detail in the section titled “What will Heaven be Like?”

In the section titled “Humanity: God’s Collective, Revisited,” I wrote that the covenant truth – Genesis 1:26-27 – is the organizing principle of existence. This organizing principle, though it may seem to be overcome in the short-term, will be vindicated and victorious in the long-term. Paul describes that vindication and victory in this passage. Namely, the people of Christian faith believe in their permanent true identity in God and the permanent perfect righteousness of it. The Christian faithful know, through their faith, that the dishonor they suffer in this life and this world does not define or express their true identity. To the contrary, they believe that they are

permanently perfectly righteous in their permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God. Regardless of any literal, sensory occurrence of prophesied eschatological events, that belief **is** eternal life with God and **is** the victory and vindication of the covenant truth.

The Book of Revelation presents Christian eschatology with very imagery-filled depictions. First, much of the book describes how the path to eternal life with God and victory and vindication of the covenant truth will be long and difficult. Christians will suffer great hardships while evil, and those who follow evil by disbelieving Jesus' teachings, will prosper.^{dlxxv} In other words, Christians will be greatly tempted to lose faith in the covenant truth and its implications and instead despair. In the end though, the people who remain steadfast in their Christian faith will be victorious over evil and the followers of evil. That is, people who remain strong in Christian faith will have the peace of mind that they are permanently perfectly righteous in their true identity because they believe that their true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. They will not allow their earthly suffering and dishonor in the judgment of people to dissuade them of those beliefs. However, those who do not have Christian faith or who lose it in their earthly suffering and public dishonor will have only the torment of disbelief in their righteousness of true identity.

Chapters 21 and 22 in the Book of Revelation describe the great honor, glory, joy, and peace of mind that awaits the Christian believer in an eternity of unity with God. Indeed, the concept of eternal life with God is presented in these chapters with the theme of Christian believers' unity with God and all its wonderful implications. Note the heavy, repeated emphasis upon this unity in Revelation 21:3: "*I heard a loud voice out of heaven saying, 'Behold, God's dwelling is with people; and he will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.'*"^{dlxxvi} In the Near East, it is considered ideal and honorable for a man to dwell with the people of his collective, so God is portrayed as doing no different. In other words, those who dwell with God for all eternity are those who believe themselves to be permanently part of his collective. More specifically, they are those who have Christian faith that their permanent true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God and thus permanently perfectly righteous.

The Christian faithful are described as the inhabitants of a New Jerusalem that has massive proportions of height, length, and width.^{dlxxvii} It is a city that is so fabulously wealthy that the very foundations of its walls are adorned with precious gemstones.^{dlxxviii} "*The city [is] pure gold, like pure glass.*"^{dlxxix} The street is made of gold, and the gates are pearls.^{dlxxx} Yet, the gates never need to be closed because there is no night there.^{dlxxxi} Nighttime in the ancient Near East is extremely dark due to the absence of electric light, so the danger of infiltration of a city by predatory animals or human enemies is significant. Thus, city gates are closed at night. However, in the New Jerusalem, God dwells with His people, Who have His strength and also have steadfast faith in Him, so neither the city nor the inhabitants are vulnerable to any danger. This is God's own city, so

it and its inhabitants are the epitome of strength. Accordingly, there is no night there, and the city gates never need to be closed.

This description of the city as having great size, wealth, and strength is meant to convey the impression that the inhabitants of the city – that is, God and His people – are permanently perfectly strong and thus, by implication, permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of each other. Most specifically, the intended impression is that the people of the city believe themselves to be permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God. In keeping with that logic, “*the city has no need for the sun or moon to shine, for the very glory of God illuminate[s] it and its lamp is the Lamb.*”^{dlxxxii} Remember that light is a symbol of honor,^{dlxxxiii} and the author’s point is that the people who dwell in the city believe in the permanent perfect honor in the judgment of God of their permanent true identity as His perfect image and likeness. They believe in that permanent true identity and permanent perfect righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ, so Jesus – i.e. “*the Lamb*”^{dlxxxiv} – is the “*lamp*” that emits the light – i.e. the honor – from God to the people. Accordingly, the people who dwell in the city need no other source of light – i.e. honor. Their permanent perfect honor in the judgment of God – i.e. permanent perfect righteousness – renders meaningless to them every source of earthly dishonor, or as the author puts it, “[God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; neither will there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more.”^{dlxxxv}

This New Jerusalem and its inhabitants are also described as being Jesus’ bride,^{dlxxxvi} “*having the glory of God.*”^{dlxxxvii} In other words, the bride is glorified by God, and the meaning is that the Christian faithful know themselves to be permanently perfectly righteous in their true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God. The bridal metaphor alludes to Near Eastern marriage customs, one of which is that the bridegroom purchases, directly or indirectly, the wedding outfit, jewelry, and cosmetics for the bride as part of the bride price that he pays for her. Additionally, the bride’s father makes a contribution to the bride’s trousseau that equals or exceeds the bride price.^{dlxxxviiidxxxix,dxc,dxci,dxcii} In this metaphor, the followers of Jesus are magnificently adorned as Jesus’ bride. Jesus is the groom, and God is the Father of the bride. An extremely large bride price was paid by the groom to adorn the bride, and that bride price is Jesus’ crucifixion.^{dxciii} The figurative meaning here is that just as expensive wedding adornments are an honor to a bride, Jesus’ crucifixion is an honor to His followers because through it and His subsequent resurrection, we are best able to believe in our permanent true identity in God and the permanent perfect righteousness of it. In other words, Jesus paid the price of crucifixion in order to communicate to us the permanent perfect honor in the judgment of God – i.e. “*the glory of God*” – that we have always possessed. Hence, the Father of the metaphorical bride – i.e. God – makes the greater contribution to the bride’s trousseau in the sense that our true identity and the righteousness of it come from God whereas our awareness of and belief in both come from Jesus.

Furthermore, the theme of unity with God as a symbol for eternal life is maintained in this marriage metaphor. In the Near East, the bride typically goes to live with her husband in the home of his father. Ideally, the husband and wife will not have an independent home until the husband's father dies. In the marriage metaphor of Revelation chapters 21-22, the followers of Christ (i.e. the bride) dwell in the New Jerusalem (i.e. the Father's home) forever with Jesus (i.e. the groom) and Yahweh (i.e. the Father). That is, the followers of Christ have eternal unity with God and thus eternal life with God because in their Christian faith, they believe that they are permanently perfectly righteous in their permanent true identity as God's perfect image and likeness.

Contrariwise, the imagery that describes the man who does not have Christian faith is much different. He faces eternal condemnation, which the Book of Revelation describes as being "*cast into the lake of fire.*"^{dxciv} Fire is here a symbol of "mental suffering, anguish, and regret."^{dxcv} Namely, the man who does not have Christian faith does not believe that his true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, so he also does not believe that he is permanently perfectly righteous in his true identity. Rather, he seeks righteousness only in his deeds, which have been imperfect, and the public reputation that they generate, which is variable,^{dxcvi} so he regrets his sins only for that reason. Therefore, he has the mental anguish of believing that not just his empirical identity is sinful but also his true identity. In his perception of himself as being totally sinful, this man believes that God rejects him. Indeed, the Revelation chapters 21-22 depiction of eternal condemnation is that of sinners without Christian faith being unable to enter the New Jerusalem to dwell with God.^{dxcvii}

What will Heaven be Like?

What will be the sensory experience of being in Heaven – that is, of being in eternal life with God? As much as we Westerners may long to have this question answered, the Bible really does not provide such an answer. Even if you interpret the Revelation description of the New Jerusalem literally, the details of how people will spend their time in eternal life with God are not provided. The reason for this omission is that the Biblical speakers and writers are almost entirely composed of Near Easterners, and the primary concern of eternity for the Near Eastern man is not such sensory details. The apostle Paul, who is a Near Easterner, faces questions like these, and he writes about the futility of asking them.

1 Corinthians 15:35-44

But someone will say, "How are the dead raised?" and, "With what kind of body do they come?" You foolish one, that which you yourself sow is not made alive unless it dies. That which you sow, you don't sow the body that will be, but a

bare grain, maybe of wheat, or of some other kind. But God gives it a body even as it pleased him, and to each seed a body of its own. All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one flesh of men, another flesh of animals, another of fish, and another of birds. There are also celestial bodies and terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial differs from that of the terrestrial. There is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory.

So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown perishable; it is raised imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body and there is also a spiritual body.

For Paul, as a Near Eastern man, the questions of sensory details about a Christian's resurrection and eternal life are foolish because they are not the important concern of eternal life. For Paul, the importance of eternal life is a man's spirit or perspective that he righteous – i.e. “*raised in glory*” and “*raised in power*. By saying that the body “*is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body*,” Paul does not deny literal, bodily resurrection but, rather, emphasizes the supreme importance of one's spirit.

The Near Eastern man wants to be forever remembered with honor, which is to say that he wants to be forever honored when people remember him. Put another way, he wants to be certain that after his death, he is forever remembered by the strong as having been strong because if he is so remembered, then he is forever honorable.^{dxcviii} For the Near Eastern man, believing himself to be eternally (i.e. permanently) perfectly honorable in the judgment of God – that is, believing himself to have eternal perfect righteousness – is eternal life with God. Since the Bible is a very Near Eastern text, this is also the Biblical definition of eternal life. This makes sense because to the Near Eastern mind, honor – most especially honor in the judgment of the Most Honorable Yahweh – is the prerequisite of life in the sense of meaningful existence.^{dxcix} By extension, because eternal life with God is believing oneself to have eternal perfect righteousness, the spiritual aspect of one's resurrection from **death** is also believing oneself to have eternal perfect righteousness.

Jesus, as a Near Eastern man, also focuses upon righteousness in His description of eternal life with God rather than the mundane sensory details of that experience. With vivid imagery, He describes the victory and vindication of His teachings and His followers' perception of their righteousness that is eternal life with God, but He is silent about the daily sensory experience of that eternal life. In Matthew 24:29-31, Jesus says,

But immediately after the suffering of those days, the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the

heavens will be shaken; and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky. Then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. He will send out his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together his chosen ones from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

Interpreting this passage figuratively, there will be days of great suffering when all earthly sources of honor will be gone. Metaphorically, all the celestial bodies that emit light, which is a symbol of honor,^{dc} will be darkened or fall. All people will be tempted to conclude that God has forsaken them, but only the followers of Jesus will remain confident in their permanent perfect righteousness because they believe in Jesus' teachings. "*All the tribes of the earth will mourn*" because of the earthly suffering and dishonor, but the Christians will receive relief in their faith. Metaphorically, they will see "*the sign of the Son of Man [...] in the sky.*" That is, they will remain strong in their faith in Jesus, the Son of Man, and His teachings about the true identity and righteousness of all sons of man – i.e. all people – so they will thus be steadfast in their belief that they are permanently perfectly righteous in their true identity. The sign of the Son of Man being in the sky symbolizes the Christians' belief that Jesus' teachings are accurate despite the earthly circumstances – i.e. they perceive His teachings to figuratively tower over all earthly suffering and dishonor. The Christians' enduring faith is described figuratively as angels gathering them together to be with Jesus and God for all eternity. The tribes of the earth "*will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory*" in the sense that they will see the great reverence for Jesus' teachings that Christians have despite their earthly circumstances, and they will also see the peace of mind that those teachings yield to the Christians despite their earthly suffering and dishonor.

Remember these concepts: eternal life with God, eternal unity with God, and entering and dwelling in the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. Given all that we have learned about Christian Doctrine, we can now understand that all of those concepts ultimately refer to your perception of, assured belief in, and peace of mind about your honor in the judgment of God – i.e. your righteousness. Of course, in your empirical identity – that is, your spirit and behavior – you are often sinful, but you have permanent perfect righteousness in your permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God. Just as sinfulness is never part of God, it also cannot be part of our true identity in God, which is why God has forgiven our sins – that is, why He does not hold them against our true identity. Therefore, all those aforementioned phrases also refer to eternal life with God, which is most completely defined as believing that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and that as a result, your true identity is permanently perfectly righteous. Indeed, the original covenant is a covenant of eternal life with God because it describes our permanent true identity by which we have permanent perfect righteousness, and Christian faith is the means to having eternal life with God because it is through such faith that we best understand and believe the covenant truth and its implications.

Contrariwise, eternal condemnation and all the references to it in the Bible ultimately refer to your belief that your true identity is dishonorable in the judgment of God – i.e. sinful. That belief is held by those who do not believe that their permanent true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. They believe that their deeds define their true identity, and they know that they have sinned. They believe in no comprehensive forgiveness from God of their sins because they do not believe that they have the true identity in God to justify that comprehensive forgiveness. These people thus lack Christian faith.

This is not to say that there is no sensory experience of eternal life with God or that we will not spend our time doing things in Heaven. Certainly, God's love for us and desire to be loved by us imply that He gives us eternal existence and consciousness in order for us to have the opportunity to eternally love Him and believe that He loves us. Additionally, believing your true identity to be eternally perfectly righteous does certainly accord with a belief in a literal sensory existence of eternal bliss. Namely, if you believe that you are permanently perfectly honorable in God's judgment because you are permanently His perfect image and likeness in your true identity, then it is logical to believe that you are eternally perfectly protected and provided for by God as a permanent member of His collective. Such a blissful existence is a fitting sensory manifestation of the blissful peace of mind that is possessed by the man who believes the covenant truth and its implications. Again, the Bible does not address the literal sensory experience of eternal life with God simply because such details are not the primary concern of the Biblical Israelite.

Nevertheless, it is a guarantee that the experience of eternal life with God will be one that befits a person who is permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God. That is, it will befit a son of God. As is written in 1 John 3:2, "*Beloved, now we are children of God. It is not yet revealed what we will be; but we know that when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him just as he is.*"

The Biblical description of eternal life with God is more akin to what we Westerners would call "dying in peace." In this life, you must develop sincere Christian faith, such that you sincerely believe your permanent true identity to be the perfect image and likeness of God. With such belief, you can "die in peace" knowing that your honor in the judgment of God – i.e. your righteousness – is permanent and perfect. In your Christian faith, you have this peace of mind about your righteousness despite all the hardships, suffering, and dishonor that you endure in this life, all of which are temptations to disbelieve your true identity in God and the righteousness of it.

The concept of eternal life with God as "dying in peace" also explains why the Bible does not describe anybody repenting of their sins after death. We would expect that many unbelievers would repent after death because when they stand before God, they have no more reason to doubt the content of the Bible. The absence of a description of such postmortem repentant sinners tempts us to believe that God does not allow postmortem repentance, but that is not the intended

interpretation. Rather, postmortem repentance is not mentioned in the Bible because it does not accord with the concept of dying in peace. Namely, since a person typically only dies once, he has only one opportunity to die with peace of mind about his righteousness. Hence, in order to die with peace of mind about your righteousness, you must, **in this life**, have sincere faith in the covenant truth and its implications, and the only effective way to have that faith is to believe in the life, teachings, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ – i.e. you must have Christian faith.

Hebrews 9:27-28 speaks to this concept of dying in peace. “*Inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once, and after this, judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.*” Jesus died once, firm in His belief in the covenant truth and its implications. In that death and subsequent resurrection and ascension, He represents, perfectly and forever, to those who believe in Him, the accuracy of the covenant truth and its implications. The second coming of Jesus will not be for Him to die again to deal with sin again and thus again prove the accuracy of the covenant truth and its implications. Rather, Jesus coming again has the figurative, doctrinal meaning of a man, at the time of his death, having strong faith in Jesus and thus having eternal life with God as a result. In other words, each person has one opportunity to die with Christian faith in the covenant truth and its implications and thus to die with the peace of mind that he has permanent perfect righteousness in his true identity. That peace of mind is eternal life with God, so by the concept that eternal life with God is dying in peace about your righteousness, each person has only this life on earth as his one opportunity to gain eternal life with God by having Christian faith.

Indeed, the transition of the Christian believer from earthly dishonor to perfect glory is the central theme of Biblical eschatology. However, no matter what happens to you in a physical, sensory way, that transition must come in your mind – i.e. your spirit. You must believe that you are permanently perfectly righteous in your true identity because your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. For the man of Christian faith, his eternal life with God starts even before bodily death because in his faith, he believes himself to have that permanent true identity and that permanent perfect righteousness of it. For this man, the victory and vindication of the covenant truth and its implications is not just an expectation for the future but also a current and eternal reality despite any hardship, suffering, or dishonor that he endures during this life. This man, though he lives on earth, already dwells in The Kingdom of Heaven.

Judgment

To be perfectly clear, the determination of whether a given person experiences eternal life with God or eternal condemnation is entirely the choice of that given person. Certainly, it takes great boldness to believe that you have permanent perfect righteousness even though you know all the sins that you have committed and know that God knows about those sins as well. That boldness comes only through having Christian faith, in which you confidently believe that your permanent true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, that you are therefore permanently perfectly righteous in your true identity, and that God has forgiven all of your sins because of your true identity. This is why it is necessary to have Christian faith in order to have eternal life with God and why the lack of Christian faith yields eternal condemnation.

Your Christian faith is of paramount importance precisely because it is your choice that determines which will be your eternal outcome. People may object, what about God's judgment of you? Of course, God's judgment is supremely relevant, but God's judgment of you was fixed permanently in Genesis 1:26-27, in which God judged you to be His perfect image and likeness in your permanent true identity and thus permanently perfectly righteous in your true identity. To illustrate, consider Revelation 20:11-15, in which we read of the resurrection of the dead and the judgment of all humanity:

I saw a great white throne and him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. There was found no place for them. I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and they opened books. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works. The sea gave up the dead who were in it. Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them. They were judged, each one according to his works. Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. If anyone was not found written in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire.

As an aside, we may wonder who sits on the throne in the passage, God or Jesus. To give context, Revelation 22:3 states about the throne in the New Jerusalem, "*the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it.*" "*The Lamb*" refers to Jesus.^{dci} The intended imagery here is that of Jesus sitting upon the throne of God, and the meaning is that Jesus' judgments are the judgments of God. Put another way, Jesus and God have the same Spirit, so Jesus judges people in accordance with God's preexisting and permanent judgment of them.

The “book of life” is also called “*the Lamb’s book of life.*”^{dcii} Again, “*the Lamb*” refers to Jesus, and “*life*” is a symbol of honor.^{dciii} Having your name in the Lamb’s book of life means that you are one of Jesus’ followers – i.e. a Christian. That is, you believe yourself to be permanently perfectly righteous – i.e. permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God – based entirely upon that which Jesus has taught you, which is your permanent true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God and the permanent perfect righteousness of it. Having that Christian faith in your true identity in God and the righteousness of it, you have eternal life with God. As is written in Revelation 21:27, the people who will dwell in the New Jerusalem – i.e. the people who will have eternal life with God – are “*only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.*”

The temptation is to read Revelation 20:11-15 as a validation of the concept of righteousness by deeds, for it states “*they were judged, each one according to his works.*” Of course, that is an incorrect interpretation. After all, the true identity of humanity did not become unlike God, and thus sinful, with the introduction of sin into the world, and the Law of God was never intended to be a standard by which you can supposedly regain your true identity in God and the righteousness of it. However, those are the false beliefs that we often have. The remedy for those false beliefs is Christian faith because in it, you are certain that your true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and thus permanently perfectly righteous. Furthermore, in Christian faith, you are certain that God has forgiven all of your sins because of your permanent true identity in Him.

John’s vision expresses the salvation from sin that comes through Christian faith. First, he describes people being judged by the contents of books that record their righteous and sinful deeds, but then, every person’s eternal life or eternal condemnation is ultimately determined by whether his name is written in **another** book – i.e. the Lamb’s book of life.^{dciv} John’s intended meaning here is that the judgment based upon deeds is nullified and superseded by a man having Christian faith. Specifically, by having Christian faith – i.e. by having your name written in the Lamb’s book of life – you have eternal life with God regardless of your deeds because in that Christian faith, you believe in the permanent perfect righteousness of your true identity.

Keep in mind that this is a vision that occurs in the mind of John, so he uses imagery to externalize his beliefs. That is, he casts Jesus and God as judging humanity, but that imagery is only an externalization of his understanding of God’s judgment of humanity. In other words, John’s vision expresses the fact that each person has eternal life with God or eternal condemnation based upon his understanding of God’s judgment of him. Namely, every person knows his own record of sins and worries that those sins have made his true identity sinful and accurately express it as being sinful. However, faith in the teachings of Jesus Christ eliminates that worry. Put another way, a man worries that his sins will yield to him eternal condemnation, but his Christian faith assures him of his eternal life with God.

Thus, in this vision, the covenant truth, its implications, and Christian faith in both are vindicated and victorious over sin. This vision affirms all that Jesus communicated in His words, deeds, death, resurrection, and ascension. A man's true identity, not his empirical identity, ultimately determines his righteousness. Humanity's true identity is permanently perfectly righteous because it is permanently God's perfect image and likeness. God has forgiven all of humanity's sins. Eternal life with God comes to a person through having Christian faith in that true identity and its implications.

Eternal condemnation comes to those whose names are not written in the Lamb's book of life – that is, those who do not have Christian faith. This is the nature of Biblical condemnation: it is a man's erroneous belief that his true identity is sinful – i.e. anything less than permanently perfectly righteous. He arrives at that false conclusion because he believes that his sins have changed his true identity from its original design of perfect righteousness and accurately express his true identity as now being sinful. This man has the great mental anguish of believing that God rejects him because of that sinfulness that he supposedly has in his true identity. Indeed, being "*cast into the lake of fire*"^{dcv} is a metaphor for being in great mental distress because fire here symbolizes "mental suffering, anguish, and regret."^{dcvii} This man does not believe in God's comprehensive forgiveness of his sins because he does not believe that he has the true identity in God to justify that comprehensive forgiveness. He regrets his sins only because he still erroneously believes that his deeds determine his true identity and the righteousness of it. Therefore, this man condemns himself through his disbelief in the covenant truth and its implications, which is to say that he condemns himself through his lack of Christian faith.

It is important to understand that while condemnation is ultimately the belief that your true identity is sinful, this is not to say that there is no sensory experience of eternal condemnation. As I wrote in the section titled "What will Heaven be Like?," God's love for us and desire to be loved by us imply that He gives us eternal existence and consciousness. Therefore, it stands to reason that there is a sensory experience of eternal condemnation. Perhaps it is one of literal eternal burning in a "*lake of fire*" or perhaps it includes other hardships. Indeed, an existence of extreme physical suffering is a fitting sensory manifestation of the mental anguish felt by a man who believes that his true identity is unlike God and thus dishonorable in God's judgment. Your sensory eternal existence reflects your belief, or lack thereof, in the covenant truth and its implications. That is, it reflects your Christian faith or the lack of it.

To be clear, God does not condemn people, but, rather, a man can condemn himself, as previously described. The imagery of Revelation 20:11-15 indicates that fact, and the apostle Paul describes it as well. In Acts 13:46, he says to a group of Jews who oppose his teachings, "*It was necessary that God's word should be spoken to you first. Since indeed you thrust it from yourselves, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles.*"^{dcvii} Consider his words,

“judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life.”^{dcviii} That is an extremely clear assertion that the outcome of eternal life with God or eternal condemnation is only the product of each man’s perspective of himself, namely his understanding of God’s judgment of him.

The reason that God does not reject any person and has forgiven all of humanity’s sins is that He knows that the permanent true identity of every person is His perfect image and likeness, in which there is no sinfulness, just as there is no sinfulness in Him. Nevertheless, having eternal life with God – that is, believing yourself to be eternally and perfectly righteous in your true identity – requires that you agree with His perspective of your true identity and thus that you believe in and accept His forgiveness of your sins. In other words, your eternal life with God is dependent upon your belief in the covenant truth and its implications, and the only effective way to believe in both is to have faith in Jesus Christ.

All the foregoing explanation aside, someone could still make the argument that this is all just my interpretation of Biblical eschatology and that maybe I am wrong. For instance, they could perhaps assert that a man’s name is only in the Lamb’s book of life if that man’s record of behavior contains more righteous words and deeds than sins. Ultimately, the justification for my beliefs about God’s judgment and our eternal life with Him comes from the whole Bible and the human experience with God. The details of that justification are explained throughout this book, but I will give a brief summary here. God made humanity as His perfect image and likeness and then remained loyal to us despite our sins. We perceive His continuing loyalty to us (again, despite our sins) though His work in our lives everyday. Jesus manifests, in word and deed, humanity’s permanent true identity in God, the permanent perfect righteousness of that true identity, and God’s forgiveness of our sins. God resurrected Jesus from death as testimony to the accuracy of Jesus’ teachings. These facts cannot be reconciled with the notion that eternal life with God is based upon one’s record of behavior containing more righteous words and deeds than sins. This combination of concepts is totally inconsistent.

If we are meant to interpret that God’s judgment of a man is based upon his words and deeds, then we must ignore God’s consistent love, protection, provision, etc. for humanity since the first day that Adam and Eve sinned, and we must also ignore the teachings of Jesus Christ and His resurrection by God that validates those teachings. In short, the weight of evidence contradicts the concepts of behavior-based righteousness and behavior-based eternal life with God. To the contrary, the weight of evidence supports the concepts of the permanent true identity of all humanity as the perfect image and likeness of God, the permanent perfect righteousness that we have in that true identity, and the eternal life with God that comes from a man’s belief in both.

Conclusion

In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus says “*Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*”

Jesus reminds us of the glorious covenant truth, which was established by God from the very beginning, that the true identity of every human being is already and permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. He further reminds us that in our true identity, we are loved by God, permanently perfectly righteous, and forgiven of our sins by God. We need not earn nor achieve this true identity and its implications but only believe both. We need not make ourselves good enough for God because God made us permanently perfect in our true identity by His own Creative design. That is why the yoke that Jesus places upon us is easy; that is why the burden that Jesus places upon us is light.

In Christian faith, we have the most satisfying rest – what Jesus describes as “*rest for your souls*”^{dcix} because in that faith, we believe that our true identity is permanently perfectly honorable in the judgment of God. In Christian faith, we know that the road to entering God’s Kingdom – that is, having peace of mind about our permanent perfect righteousness – is not a lifelong guilt-trip in which we beg God to forgive our sins. Quite to the contrary, the road to entering God’s Kingdom is no road at all, for every one of us is always at the Kingdom’s gate. We need only to enter with the boldness that comes from having faith in Jesus Christ.

After the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, God “*placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.*”^{dci} We are tempted to interpret the cherubim and the flaming sword as being meant to keep us out, but the truth is that the cherubim protect the way back to eternal life with God so that it cannot be corrupted or overcome by evil. The flaming sword, too, guards the way to eternal life with God but it is also a torch – that is, a beacon – to beckon and guide us back home from the darkness of Satan’s lies. Christian faith is that way back. As Jesus said, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me.*”^{dcxi}

Amen.

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The following works have been invaluable in helping me to understand Near Eastern culture and its relevance to Biblical interpretation. While I do make specific citations of these works in the endnotes as appropriate, I could never do justice to the fullness of the impact that these authors have had upon my understanding of the Bible, nor could I adequately express my appreciation to them. It is truly a blessing from God that these authors have put such great effort into documenting Near Eastern culture and, in many cases, its relevance to Biblical interpretation.

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- xxii Collins, Francis S. The Language of God. Copyright 2006. This book, and the one listed next, describe the great many characteristics of the earth and the universe that allow for human life to exist, but the authors argue that these characteristics support the belief in the existence of God.
- xxiii Ross, Hugh. Improbable Planet. Copyright 2016.
- xxiv Hannah Ritchie, Lucas Rodés-Guirao, Edouard Mathieu, Marcel Gerber, Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, Joe Hasell and Max Roser (2023) - "Population Growth". Published online at OurWorldInData.org. Retrieved from: '<https://ourworldindata.org/population-growth>' [Online Resource]
- xxv See the section titled "Corrective Action."
- xxvi As an explanatory note for the interchangeable usage of the terms "God's Kingdom" and the "Kingdom of Heaven," note that the Israelites had a concept of God as being in Heaven, likely because the Hebrew and Greek words, which are translated as "heavens," refer to the sky, and God is everywhere just like the sky is everywhere. Also, the supreme height of the sky is a metaphor for glory, and God has the greatest glory. There are allusions in the Bible to the concept of God being in Heaven, including Exodus 20:22 and Matthew 6:9. See also Errico, Rocco A. and George M. Lamsa. Aramaic Light on the Gospel of Matthew. Copyright 2000. p.302.
- xxvii Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/4102.htm>>.
- xxviii Webster, Noah. An American Dictionary of the English Language. "Faith." Copyright 1828. <<https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/faith>>.
- xxix Rihbany, Abraham Mitrie. The Syrian Christ. Copyright 1916. p.115.
- xxx For greater understanding on the philosophical distinction between good and evil, see Boman, Thorlief. Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek. Copyright 1960. p.56-58,
- xxxi BibleHub. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance and Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/8415.htm>>.
- xxxii Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon and Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7451.htm>>.

- xxxiii Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon (source of quote) and Strong's Exhaustive Concordance.
 <<https://biblehub.com/greek/1228.htm>>.
- xxxiv Wikipedia contributors. "Transliteration." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 11 Jul. 2023. Web. 20 Sep. 2023.
- xxxv Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon and Strong's Exhaustive Concordance.
 <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7854.htm>>.
- xxxvi Zondervan. NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible. Copyright 2016. p.6-7.
- xxxvii Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon and Strong's Exhaustive Concordance.
 <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7549.htm>>.
- xxxviii Emphasis is mine.
- xxxix I will describe the concept of honor beginning in the section titled "The Near Eastern Concept of Identity."
- xl Boman, Thorlief. Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek. Copyright 1960. Chapter I and p.154-157.
 Admittedly, it is hard to choose specific passages from this book to reference simply because the entire book is an excellent description of the philosophical differences between Near Easterners and people of a Greco-Roman based philosophy.
- xli Boman, Thorlief. Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek. Copyright 1960. p.69ff.
- xlii Nordenstam, Tore. Sudanese Ethics. Copyright 1968.
- xliii Peristiany, John G. Honour and shame : the values of Mediterranean Society. Copyright 1965.
- xliv Patai, Raphael. The Arab Mind. Copyright 1976. p.164-165, 225, 311.
- xlv Hamady, Sania. Temperament and Character of the Arabs. Copyright 1960. Chapters II-III and p.198-200.
- xlvi To borrow the phrasing used by Abraham Rihbany – see the section titled "Where is all the Scripture?"
- xlvii Hamady, Sania. Temperament and Character of the Arabs. Copyright 1960. p.39.
- xlviii Hamady, Sania. Temperament and Character of the Arabs. Copyright 1960. p.65.
- xlix In particular, Tore Nordenstam writes extensively on these distinctions. Nordenstam, Tore. Sudanese Ethics. Copyright 1968.
- l Summarization under the one term "honor" can sometimes be less than ideal. For example, while all the members of a collective share a common true identity and thus are equally honorable in that true identity in the judgment of each other, some members of that collective command greater respect than do other members. Typically, these are the elders of the collective and the ideal model of the collective. Fuad Khuri calls this status "first among equals." Khuri, Fuad I. Tents and Pyramids: Games and Ideology in Arab Culture from Backgammon to Autocratic Rule. Copyright 1990.

Therefore, we can discern a distinction between honor and respect, prestige, esteem, etc. Nevertheless, a man of such a status is not alleviated of the requirement of supporting and defending every one of his collective members. Indeed, a Near Eastern tribal chief rules only by his ability to gain the consent and consensus of his leading tribesmen, so he must always honor his fellow tribesmen lest he risk gaining their disfavor and potentially engendering a tribal split. Burckhardt, John Lewis. Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys. Volume 1. Copyright 1831. p.115-119.

- li Gulick, John. Social Structure and Culture Change in a Lebanese Village. Copyright 1955. p.156ff.
- lii Genesis 2:7.
- liii Ammar, Hamed. Growing Up in an Egyptian Village: Silwa, Province of Aswan. Copyright 1966. p.28.
- liv See the section titled "The Near Eastern Concept of Identity."
- lv Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/5485.htm>>.
- lvi Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2580.htm>>.
- lvii BibleHub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/1285.htm>>.
- lviii See the section titled "Why does our True Identity Matter?"
- lix Boman, Thorlief. Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek. Copyright 1960. p.36-37, 154ff.
- lx Genesis 15; Genesis 26:1-5; Genesis 28:10-15.
- lxi Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/988.htm>>.
- lxii John 10:39.
- lxiii Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon and Strong's Exhaustive Concordance.
 <<https://biblehub.com/greek/4084.htm>>.
- lxiv "Affection." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster,
 <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/affection>>. Accessed 23 Dec. 2024.
- lxv Hamady, Sania. Temperament and Character of the Arabs. Copyright 1960. p.198-200.
- lxvi Rihbany, Abraham Mitrie. The Syrian Christ. Copyright 1916. p.96-103.
- lxvii Errico, Rocco A. Let There Be Light: The Seven Keys. Copyright 1994. p.10-12,116.
- lxviii For an explanation of the permanence of our true identity as God's perfect image and likeness, see the section titled "Humanity: God's Collective, Revisited."
- lxix Wikipedia contributors. "Transliteration." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 11 Jul. 2023. Web. 20 Sep. 2023.
- lxx Blue Letter Bible. Entry for H3068. Strong's Concordance.
 <<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h3068/kjv/wlc/0-1/>>.

- lxxi Bible Hub. Strong's Concordance and Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/8034.htm>>.
- lxxii Harris, R. Laird, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. Copyright 1980. p.934.
- lxxiii Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/3686.htm>>.
- lxxiv Harris, R. Laird, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. Copyright 1980. p.934.
- lxxv Bible Hub. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/4872.htm>>.
- lxxvi Botterweck, G. Johannes and Helmer Ringgren. Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament. Volume 5. Copyright 1986. Page 500ff.
- lxxvii Harris, R. Laird, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. Copyright 1980. p.210-212; 213-214.
- lxxviii Indeed, according to Boman, “the distinction between becoming and being [...] appears to have been irrelevant to the Hebrews or to have been experienced by them as a unity.” Boman, Thorleif. Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek. Copyright 1960. p.33.
- lxxix Bible Hub. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/3938.htm>>.
- lxxx Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5315.htm>>.
- lxxxi See the section titled “The Near Eastern Concept of Identity.”
- lxxxii Bible Hub. Strong's Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/430.htm>>.
- lxxxiii Emphasis is mine.
- lxxxiv Bible Hub. Interlinear Bible. Genesis 2:4. <<https://biblehub.com/interlinear/genesis/2-4.htm>>.
- lxxxv In fact, in the ancient Hebrew language, “the plural form can also express a collective [...] sense of a singular item.” unfoldingWord Hebrew Grammar. Copyright 2023, unfoldingWord, CC BY-SA 4.0. Revision bd76b6d6. <https://uhg.readthedocs.io/en/latest/number_plural.html>.
- lxxxvi 1 John 4:8,16.
- lxxxvii Genesis 2:18.
- lxxxviii Leviticus 19:18.
- lxxxix See also the section titled “The Absence of Sin.”
- xc Bible Hub. Strong's Concordance and Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5647.htm>>.
- xcii Bible Hub. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/8104.htm>>.
- xciii Blue Letter Bible. Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon. <<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h7363/kjv/wlc/0-1/>>.
- xciv See the section titled “The Work of Humanity.”
- xcv Genesis 3:16-19.
- xcvi See also the section titled “Corrective Action.”
- xcvii See the section titled “The Near Eastern Concept of Identity.”
- xcviii Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5048.htm>>.
- xcix See the section titled “The Name of God.”
- c Genesis 1:27.
- ci Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon and Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/120.htm>>.
- cii Genesis 2:23.
- ciii Bible Hub. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/376.htm>>, <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/802.htm>>.
- civ Ammar, Hamed. Growing Up in an Egyptian Village: Silwa, Province of Aswan. Copyright 1966. p.42ff.
- cv Patai, Raphael. Sex and Family in the Bible and the Middle East. Copyright 1959. p.20-21.
- cvi Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5800.htm>>.
- cvi Patai, Raphael. Golden River to Golden Road: Society, Culture, and Change in the Middle East. Third, Enlarged Edition. Copyright 1969. p.88.
- cvi Friedl, Erika. Children of Deh Koh: Young Life in an Iranian Village. Copyright 1997. p.115.
- cix Granqvist, Hilma. Birth and Childhood among the Arabs: Studies in a Muhammadan Village in Palestine. Copyright 1947. p.34-37.
- cx 1 Corinthians chapter 7 indicates that Paul was not married, and there is no indication in the Bible that Jesus was married either.
- cxi Bourdieu, Pierre. “The Sentiment of Honour in Kabyle Society.” Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society. Ed. J.G. Peristiany. Copyright 1965. p.223-226.
- cxi Granqvist, Hilma. Birth and Childhood among the Arabs: Studies in a Muhammadan Village in Palestine. Copyright 1947. p.154-165.
- cxi Hamady, Sania. Temperament and Character of the Arabs. Copyright 1960. p.65.
- cxiv Patai, Raphael. The Arab Mind. Copyright 1976. p.130-131.
- cxv Rihbany, Abraham Mitrie. The Syrian Christ. Copyright 1916. Part V.
- cxvi See the section titled “Faith.”
- cxvii Granqvist, Hilma. Marriage Conditions in a Palestinian Village II. Copyright 1935. Chapters IX and X.

- cxviii Dickson, H.R.P. The Arab of the Desert. Second Edition. Copyright 1951. p.144.
- cxix Granqvist, Hilma. Marriage Conditions in a Palestinian Village II. Copyright 1935. p.198. Granqvist quotes the words of Sitt Louisa.
- cxx Beck, Dorothy Fahs. "The Changing Moslem Family of the Middle East." Readings in Arab Middle Eastern Societies and Cultures. Editors Abdulla M. Lutfiyya and Charles W. Churchill. Copyright 1970. p.569.
- cxxi Klunzinger, C.B., M.D. Upper Egypt: Its People and Its Products. Copyright 1878. p.165.
- cxxii Friedl, Erika. Children of Deh Koh: Young Life in an Iranian Village. Copyright 1997. p.139-140.
- cxxiii Goodrich-Freer, A. Arabs in Tent & Town. Copyright 1924. p.50.
- cxxiv Wilson, C.T. Peasant Life in the Holy Land. Copyright 1906. p.144-146.
- cxxv Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon and Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/177.htm>>. Significantly, while 11:13 does use the word "unveiled," the original Greek word can also be translated as simply "uncovered." It is highly unlikely that the custom involved here is face veiling in addition to head covering.
- cxxvi Indeed, Young's Literal Translation renders 1 Corinthians 11:10 with the phrasing, "the woman ought to have a **token of** authority upon the head." Emphasis is mine.
- cxxvii Murray, G.W. Sons of Ishmael: A Study of the Egyptian Bedouin. Copyright 1935. p.138.
- cxxviii See the section titled "The Creation of Woman."
- cxxix Westermarck, Edward. Ritual and Belief in Morocco. Volume 2. Copyright 1926. p.434.
- cxxx Granqvist, Hilma. Birth and Childhood among the Arabs: Studies in a Muhammadan Village in Palestine. Copyright 1947. p.178-180.
- cxxxi Deuteronomy 24:1-4.
- cxxxii Exodus 20:14.
- cxxxiii Hamady, Sania. Temperament and Character of the Arabs. Copyright 1960. p.50-51.
- cxxxiv Deuteronomy 24:1-4.
- cxxxv See also the section titled "Is Sin Meaningless?"
- cxxxvi See the section titled "The 'Logic' of Sin."
- cxxxvii Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/4202.htm>>.
- cxxxviii For an example of the word being used specifically for illicit sexual intercourse that does not involve a prostitute, see 1 Corinthians 5:1.
- cxxxix See Chapter 7: Jesus Christ.
- cxl Hamady, Sania. Temperament and Character of the Arabs. Copyright 1960. p.50.
- cxl Patai, Raphael. Golden River to Golden Road: Society, Culture, and Change in the Middle East. Third, Enlarged Edition. Copyright 1969. p.125-126.
- cxl Patai, Raphael. Sex and Family in the Bible and the Middle East. Copyright 1959. p.145-148.
- cxl Patai, Raphael. The Arab Mind. Copyright 1976. p.135.
- cxl Glazebrook, Allison. "Gender and Sexuality." Themes in Greek Society and Culture: An Introduction to Ancient Greece. Ed. Allison Glazebrook and Christina Vester. Copyright 2017. p.273.
- cxlv Olson, Kelly. "Roman Sexuality and Gender." Themes in Roman Society and Culture: An Introduction to Ancient Rome. Ed. Matt Gibbs, Milorad Nikolic, and Pauline Ripat. Copyright 2014. p.174-176.
- cxlvi Patai, Raphael. The Arab Mind. Copyright 1976. p.134-135.
- cxlvii Hamady, Sania. Temperament and Character of the Arabs. Copyright 1960. p.37.
- cxlviii See also the section titled "Repentance and Atonement."
- cxl ix See the sections titled "Faith" and "Elohim."
- cl See the section titled "Genesis 1:26-27 – The Most Important Passage in the Bible."
- cli Webster, Noah. An American Dictionary of the English Language. "Thesis." Copyright 1828. <<https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Thesis>>.
- cли Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/1343.htm>>.
- cliii See the section titled "The Near Eastern Concept of Identity."
- cliv Romans 3:21-23 and Galatians 2:15-16.
- clv Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/266.htm>>.
- clvi The concept of honor in Near Eastern culture has been written about by many authors in many works, such that naming one would do injustice to the totality of the subject. If you would like to learn more about this concept, I recommend consulting the works listed in the bibliography of this book.
- clvii See the section titled "The Near Eastern Concept of Identity."
- clviii See the section titled "What is the Nature of God?"
- clix Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon and Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/1939.htm>>.
- clx For an example of a morally positive usage of the word, see 1 Thessalonians 2:17.
- clxi Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/1185.htm>>.
- clxii Bible Hub. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/5259.htm>>.
- clxiii See the section titled "Why Does our True Identity Matter?" in chapter 3 as well as the section titled "Definitions" in chapter 4.

clxiv Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon and Strong's Exhaustive Concordance.

<<https://biblehub.com/greek/3985.htm>>.

clxv Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon and Strong's Exhaustive Concordance.

<<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5254.htm>>.

clxvi Deuteronomy 6:16.

clxvii Judges 7:9-11.

clxviii Judges 7:13-15.

clxix See the section titled "The Name of God," where I explain that life symbolizes honor.

clxx Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon and Strong's Exhaustive Concordance.

<<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/6175.htm>>.

clxxi The wording of the World English Bible translation of Genesis 2:9 can be a bit confusing. It states, "Out of the ground Yahweh God made every tree to grow that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food, including the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." One could interpret that phrasing to mean that the Tree of Life is in the middle of the garden while the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is elsewhere in the garden. However, the grammar of the original Hebrew can just as accurately be interpreted to mean that both the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil are in the middle of the garden. Furthermore, given that God identifies the forbidden tree in Genesis 2:17 as specifically being the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and that Adam and Eve commit sin by eating fruit from a tree in the middle of the garden, the only logical conclusion is that they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and thus that it must be in the middle of the garden as well as the Tree of Life.

clxxii The Christian Standard Bible (CSB) phrases Genesis 2:9 in such a way that both trees' location in the middle of the garden is emphasized. Christian Standard Bible®, Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

clxxiii Indeed, in Genesis 3:17, Yahweh holds Adam accountable because he "listened to [his] wife's voice." The meaning there is that Eve spoke to Adam the same lie that the serpent spoke to her.

clxxiv See the section titled "The Absence of Sin."

clxxv Blumberg, Alex. "Without Fail" podcast. September 9, 2019.

<<https://gimletmedia.com/shows/without-fail/xjh3l4>>. In an example of inspiration coming from unlikely places, this podcast episode was an interview of a fashion entrepreneur who made an observation about the use of clothing in the Genesis 3 story. That observation, and the conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee about it, started my process of thinking about the symbolism in the clothing of Adam and Eve.

clxxvi See the sections titled "Faith" and "The Absence of Sin."

clxxvii Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/3340.htm>>.

clxxviii See Deuteronomy chapters 28-30 as well as my description of God's behavior toward us in the section titled "The Nature of the Law."

clxxix Patai, Raphael. The Arab Mind. Copyright 1976. p.78-79.

clxxx Hamady, Sania. Temperament and Character of the Arabs. Copyright 1960. p.32,94,190.

clxxxi Emphasis is mine.

clxxxii Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/4480.htm>>.

clxxxiii Pealim. "Hebrew Prepositions." <<https://www.pealim.com/dict/4958-ke/>>.

clxxxiv Gesenius, Wilhem. Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar. Translated by T.J. Conant. 17th ed. Copyright 1856. p.178-179. Section 97.

clxxxv Gesenius, Wilhem. Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar. Translated by T.J. Conant. 17th ed. Copyright 1856. p.185-186. Sections 101 and 102.

clxxxvi Keep in mind that the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament had little to no punctuation, so the comma preceding the phrase "*knowing good and evil*" in the English translation is almost certainly an editorial insertion by the translator and thus is not cause to dispute my interpretation of the passage. Toy, Crawford Howell and Wilhelm Bacher. "Punctuation." Jewish Encyclopedia. Copyright 1906. <<https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12441-punctuation>>.

clxxxvii Emphasis is mine.

clxxxviii See the section titled "What is the Purpose and Benefit of Being a Christian?"

clxxxix See Chapter 12 of this book for more information on the topic of eternal life.

cxc See also the section titled "Why does our True Identity Matter?" for a list of the implications of our true identity being God's perfect image and likeness.

cxcii Shouby, E. "The Influence of the Arabic Language on the Psychology of the Arabs." The Middle East Journal. Summer 1951: Vol 5 Iss 3. p.295ff. Reprinted in Readings in Arab Middle Eastern Societies and Cultures. Editors Abdulla M. Lutfiyya and Charles W. Churchill. Copyright 1970. p.688-703.

cxciii Hamady, Sania. Temperament and Character of the Arabs. Copyright 1960. p.59-67,198-201.

cxciv Berger, Morroe. The Arab World Today. Copyright 1962. p.179-184.

cxcv See the section titled "Externalization of Personal Perspective/Perception" for the definition of a vision.

cxcvi For the truth about such seeming injustices, see the section titled "Corrective Action."

- cxcvii See the sections titled “Humanity: God’s Collective,” “The Absence of Sin,” and “Humanity: God’s Collective, Revisited.”
- cxcviii Exodus 20:15.
- cxcix John 8:44.
- cc Bible Hub. Thayer’s Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/1228.htm>>.
- cci See the section titled “The Near Eastern Concept of Identity.”
- ccii Emphasis is mine.
- cciii Errico, Rocco A. Let There Be Light: The Seven Keys. Copyright 1994. p.47-50.
- cciv See also 1 Samuel 3:1. In that verse, the author implicitly equates communication from God with visions that people experience of/from God. Furthermore, the verse implies that such visions are not involuntarily imposed upon a person by God but are rather voluntarily entered into by a person who seeks to learn Yahweh’s will and wisdom.
- ccv See the section titled “The Original Covenant.”
- ccvi Hamady, Sania. Temperament and Character of the Arabs. Copyright 1960. p.184-193.
- ccvii Gregg, Gary S. The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology. Copyright 2005. p.343-344.
- ccviii Granqvist, Hilma. Birth and Childhood among the Arabs: Studies in a Muhammadan Village in Palestine. Copyright 1947. p.177-178.
- ccix Patai, Raphael. The Arab Mind. Copyright 1976. p.147-150.
- ccx Exodus 9:12; 10:1; 10:20; 10:27; 11:10; 14:8.
- ccxi Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/3820.htm>>.
- ccxii Exodus 8:15; 8:32; 9:34.
- ccxiii Gregg, Gary S. The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology. Copyright 2005. p.343-344.
- ccxiv Granqvist, Hilma. Muslim Death and Burial: Arab Customs and Traditions Studied in a Village in Jordan. Copyright 1965. p.21.
- ccxv See the section titled “Where is all the Scripture?”
- ccxvi See the section titled “Testing God, Testing Man.”
- ccxvii Hamady, Sania. Temperament and Character of the Arabs. Copyright 1960. p.83-86.
- ccxviii Bourdieu, Pierre. “The Sentiment of Honour in Kabyle Society.” Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society. Ed. J.G. Peristiany. Copyright 1965. p.204-215.
- ccxix See also the sections titled “Why did God Create Evil?” and “The Work of Humanity.”
- ccxx Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon and Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/1288.htm>>.
- ccxxi Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon and Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7812.htm>>.
- ccxxii Scripture quotation taken from the (NASB®) New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. lockman.org
- ccxxiii See also the section titled “The Only Way to the Father.”
- ccxxiv See John 10:34 where Jesus refers to a quote from Psalms as being part of the Law. Also, see Bible Hub. Thayer’s Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/3551.htm>>.
- ccxxv Exodus 18:24-26.
- ccxxvi Similar methods are used by scholars to determine Islamic law. See the following references: Tyan, E. “Fatwa.” The Encyclopedia of Islam. New Edition. Edited by B. Lewis, CH. Pellat, and J. Schacht. Volume II. Copyright 1991. p.866. | Schacht, J. “Fiqh.” The Encyclopedia of Islam. New Edition. Edited by B. Lewis, CH. Pellat, and J. Schacht. Volume II. Copyright 1991. p.886-891. | Calder, N. “Sharia.” The Encyclopedia of Islam. New Edition. Edited by C.E. Bosworth, et. al. Volume IX. Copyright 1997. p.325. | Schacht, J. and D.B. Macdonald. “Idjtiad.” The Encyclopedia of Islam. New Edition. Edited by B. Lewis, et. al. Volume III. Copyright 1986. p.1026-1027. | Bulut, Aslihan. “Islamic Law.” Columbia Law School. <<https://guides.law.columbia.edu/c.php?g=1221841>>. | Ibn Khaldun. The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History. Translated by Franz Rosenthal. Volume 3. Copyright 1958. Sections 12 and 13. | Wikipedia contributors. “Sources of Sharia.” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 4 Aug. 2024. Web. 12 Nov. 2024. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sources_of_Sharia>. | Calder, N. “Taklid.” The Encyclopedia of Islam. New Edition. Edited by P.J. Bearman, et. al. Volume X. Copyright 2000. p.137-138. | Wikipedia contributors. “Taqlid.” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 24 Oct. 2024. Web. 12 Nov. 2024. <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taqlid>>.
- ccxxvii See the section titled “Why Study Near Eastern Culture?” for a description of the preservation of custom and tradition in the Near East.
- ccxxviii Genesis 15.
- ccxxix See also the section titled “Divine Fatalism.”
- ccxxx Patai, Raphael. “The Middle East as a Culture Area.” Readings in Arab Middle Eastern Societies and Cultures. Editors Abdulla M. Lutfiyya and Charles W. Churchill. Copyright 1970. p.202.
- ccxxxi Patai, Raphael. “The Middle East as a Culture Area.” Readings in Arab Middle Eastern Societies and Cultures. Editors Abdulla M. Lutfiyya and Charles W. Churchill. Copyright 1970. p.189.

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- ccxli See the section titled "Externalization of Personal Perspective/Perception."
- ccxlii See the section titled "Externalization of Personal Perspective/Perception."
- ccxliii See the section titled "Honor and Dishonor."
- ccxliv Mark 2:27.
- ccxlv See the section titled "The Near Eastern Concept of Identity."
- ccxlvi See the section titled "Faith."
- ccxlvii See also the section titled "Proselytization."
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- cclvi See the section titled "The Name of God."
- cclvii See the section titled "The Name of God."
- cclviii Emphasis is mine.
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- cccxiv Leviticus 15:18.
- cccxv Leviticus 11:24-28; 11:39-40; 17:15-16.
- cccxvi While we may be tempted to ascribe a different meaning to the phrase "cut off," such as exile, the first use of the phrase in the Bible is in Genesis 9:11, where the context is the death of people in the Great Flood. Additionally, even the concept of a man being exiled from his people would still connote death to the ancient Near Easterner because it is extremely unlikely that a man could survive in those times without the support of his collective. Hence, in either interpretation, death is the ultimate meaning of the phrase.

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- cccxvii Exodus 28:6.
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- ccclv See the section titled "Corrective Action."
- ccclvi See Chapter 12 of this book for details on eternal life.
- ccclvii See also the section titled "Externalization of Personal Perspective/Perception."
- ccclviii See also the section titled "Externalization of Personal Perspective/Perception."
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- ccclxxxi See the section titled “The ‘Logic’ of Sin.”
- ccclxxxii See the section titled “Definitions” in Chapter 4 of this book.
- ccclxxxiii Genesis 3:13.
- ccclxxxiv Cf. my analysis, in the section titled “Chapter 8: Communicating the Gospel to the Greco-Roman Audience,” of Paul’s description of sin.
- ccclxxxv U. Dahmen, Bonn. “rûm; mārôm.” Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament. Volume XIII. Ed. Botterweck, G. Johannes, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry. Translated by David E. Green. Copyright 2004. p.405.
- ccclxxxvi Numbers 15:30-31.
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- ccclxxxviii Leviticus 4:29.
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- cdxxii Musil, Alois. The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins. Copyright 1928. p.462.
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- cdxl Matthew 16:13-17.
- cdxli Matthew 16:20.
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cdlxv John 21:15-17.

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cdlxiii 1 Timothy 2:11-15. See also the section of this book titled “The Near Eastern Woman.”

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cdlxv See the sections titled “The Creation of Woman” and “The Near Eastern Woman.”

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cdlxvii Note that the word “Ephrathah” refers to the land and tribe of Judah. Ephrathah was a member of the tribe of Judah and also possibly the founder of Bethlehem (see 1 Chronicles 4:4). Thus, “Bethlehem Ephrathah” refers to the town of Bethlehem in the land of Judah. Wikipedia contributors. “Ephrath.” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 18 Dec. 2024. Web. 6 Feb. 2025.

cdlxviii Matthew 2:1 and Luke 2:4-6

cdlxix Bible Hub. Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance and Thayer’s Greek Lexicon.

<<https://biblehub.com/greek/4137.htm>>.

cdlxx See the sections titled “Why was the Law not Enough?” and “Greater Righteousness.”

cdlxxi Emphasis is mine.

cdlxxii Musil, Alois. The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins. Copyright 1928. p.505-506. | Patai,

Raphael. The Arab Mind. Copyright 1976. p.102. These authors describe how the Near Eastern perspective equates the color black with dishonor and the color white with honor. I would argue that the equations can be extended to darkness and light. Black is the color of darkness, and white is the color of sunlight when the sun is fully risen and unobstructed.

cdlxxiii Matthew 28:19 – emphasis in mine.

cdlxxiv See also the section titled “The Original Covenant.”

cdlxxv Romans chapters 9-11.

cdlxxvi Romans 8:38-39.

cdlxxvii Leviticus 19:18.

cdlxxviii Matthew 3:13-15.

cdlxxix Bible Hub. Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance and Thayer’s Greek Lexicon.

<<https://biblehub.com/greek/4137.htm>>.

cdxc See the section titled “What will Heaven be Like?”

cdxi Mark 1:4, from the Gospel of Mark version of Jesus’ baptism.

cdxcii See Matthew 25:24 for a similar usage of the Greek word for “know” to mean believe, conclude, “understand,” “perceive,” etc. Bible Hub. Thayer’s Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/1097.htm>>.

cdxciii See also the section titled “Divinity.”

cdxciv Some examples include Exodus 4:22 and Deuteronomy 14:1

cdxcv Deuteronomy 7:6.

cdxcvi One example of the special esteem shown to Jesus by members of the public is in Mark 11:7-10.

cdxcvii Emphasis is mine.

cdxcviii See the section titled “What will Heaven be Like?”

cdxcix I first analyzed this verse in the section titled “Sins.”

- d See “Chapter 4: Righteousness and Sin.”
- di Emphasis is mine.
- dii Errico, Rocco A. Let There Be Light: The Seven Keys. Copyright 1994. p.219-221. While Errico stops short of directly professing his belief that Jesus’ resurrection was purely figurative, he does heavily imply that to be his belief. Also, he quotes a piece of writing from his mentor, George Lamsa, in which Mr. Lamsa heavily implies the same belief.
- divi Errico, Rocco A. and George M. Lamsa. Aramaic Light on the Gospel of Matthew. Copyright 2000. p.363-366.
- div Acts 9:27.
- dv Exodus 28:1.
- dvi Near Eastern society and culture is patrilineal. Patai, Raphael. Sex and Family in the Bible and the Middle East. Copyright 1959. p.19-20.
- dvii Matthew 1:2-16.
- dviii Hebrews 5:6.
- dix Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/1700.htm>>.
- dx Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon and Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/4428.htm>>, <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/4442.htm>> and <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/6664.htm>>.
- dxi Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon and Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/8004.htm>> and <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/8003.htm>>. The author of the Book of Hebrews here refers to the Genesis story about Melchizedek, so it is appropriate to examine the definition of the Hebrew word for Salem as used in Genesis 3:18.
- dxii Genesis 14:19.
- dxiii Emphasis is mine.
- dxiv See the sections titled “The Near Eastern Concept of Identity” and “The Name of God.”
- dxv While Sufism is not part of Judaism or Christianity, the referenced Near Eastern concept of a “way” is best exemplified by the term’s usage in Islamic Sufism. Schimmel, Annemarie. Mystical Dimensions of Islam. Copyright 1975. Chapter 3. | Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements. Ed. Upal, Muhammad Afzal and Carole M. Cusack. Copyright 2021. “Introduction to Part 4” by the editors. “Sufism” by Marta Domínguez Díaz. | Nicholson, Reynold A. The Mystics of Islam. Copyright 1963. Chapter I.
- dxvi See also my explanation of John 4:21-24 in the section titled “Bless and Worship.”
- dxvii Wikipedia contributors. “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 6 Aug. 2024. Web. 11 Aug. 2024.
- dxviii See the section titled “Son of Man and Son of God.”
- dxix Ferguson, Everett. Backgrounds of Early Christianity. Third Edition. Copyright 2003. p.325.
- dxx Stace, W.T. A Critical History Of Greek Philosophy. 1st ed. Copyright 1920. p.106-154.
- dxxi Plato. Protagoras. Translated by C.C.W. Taylor. Oxford University Press. Copyright 1996. Paragraphs 352a-357e.
- dxxii Significantly, in the original Greek of this verse, the verb “produced” is conjugated in the aorist tense with a middle voice. Aorist tense refers to action without specification of timing, and the middle voice refers to reflexive action. “Tense Aorist.” unfoldingWord Greek Grammar. © Copyright 2023, unfoldingWord, CC BY-SA 4.0. Revision 197f6134. Original work available at <https://unfoldingword.org/ugg/>.
- <https://ugg.readthedocs.io/en/latest/tense_aorist.html#overview> | “Voice Middle.” unfoldingWord Greek Grammar. © Copyright 2023, unfoldingWord, CC BY-SA 4.0. Revision 197f6134. Original work available at <https://unfoldingword.org/ugg/>. <https://ugg.readthedocs.io/en/latest/voice_middle.html>.
- dxxiii See the section titled “The ‘Logic’ of Sin.”
- dxxiv Ibn Khaldun. The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History. Translated by Franz Rosenthal. Volume 1. Copyright 1958. p.264-265, 267-268, 276-278, 374-377.
- dxxv Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3.
- dxxvi Romans 3:28.
- dxxvii See also Chapter 12 of this book.
- dxxviii Matthew 28:19-20.
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- dxxx Ibn Khaldun. The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History. Translated by Franz Rosenthal. Volume 3. Copyright 1958. p.383,392-398.
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- dxxxii See the section titled “Son of Man and Son of God.”
- dxxxiii Bible Hub. Thayer’s Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/3100.htm>>.
- dxxxiv See the section titled “The Absence of Sin.”
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- dxxxvi See these verses and their surrounding context: Judges 14:19 and 15:14.
- dxxxvii 1 Samuel 16:13.
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- dxxxix Trumbull, H. Clay, D.D. Studies in Oriental Social Life. Copyright 1895. p.105ff.

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- dxli Kraemer, David. "Food, Eating, and Meals." The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine.
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- dxlvi Friedl, Erika. Children of Deh Koh: Young Life in an Iranian Village. Copyright 1997. p.146.
- dxlvi Bible Hub. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/2917.htm>>.
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- dxlix Matthew 6:33
- dl Mark 11:25-26.
- dli Matthew 6:7-8.
- dlii See the section titled "Faith."
- dliii Alfred, Justin T. Simplified Greek Grammar.
<https://www.blueletterbible.org/assets-v3/pdf/grammars/Simplified_Greek_Grammar_v5_2018.09.18.pdf>. p.66.
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- dlvi Errico, Rocco A. and George M. Lamsa. Aramaic Light on the Gospel of Matthew. Copyright 2000. p.302.
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- dlviii See the section titled "The Name of God," where I describe that the ancient Hebrew and Greek concept of a name refers to a person's entire identity.
- dlix See the section titled "What is the Purpose and Benefit of Being a Christian?"
- dlx Matthew 6:14-15.
- dlxi "Mood Subjunctive." unfoldingWord Greek Grammar. © Copyright 2023, unfoldingWord, CC BY-SA 4.0. Revision 197f6134. Original work available at <https://unfoldingword.org/ugg/>.
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- dlxv Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/281.htm>>.
- dlxvi Exodus 4:5.
- dlxvii John 20:29.
- dlxviii Mark 10:52 and Luke 17:19 are two examples.
- dlxix See the section titled "Faith."
- dlxx See the section titled "The Name of God."
- dlxxi Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus. Entry for "Eschatology."
<<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/eschatology>>.
- dlxxii John 3:18.
- dlxxiii See also the section titled "Son of Man and Son of God."
- dlxxiv See also the sections titled "The Name of God" and "Honor and Dishonor."
- dlxxv Descriptions of these hardships are in most of the Book of Revelation, one example being Chapter 13.
- dlxxvi Emphasis is mine.
- dlxxvii Revelation 21:15-17.
- dlxxviii Revelation 21:19-21.
- dlxxix Revelation 21:18.
- dlxxx Revelation 21:21.
- dlxxxi Revelation 21:25.
- dlxxxii Revelation 21:23.
- dlxxxiii Musil, Alois. The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins. Copyright 1928. p.505-506. | Patai, Raphael. The Arab Mind. Copyright 1976. p.102. These authors describe how the Near Eastern perspective equates the color black with dishonor and the color white with honor. I would argue that the equations can be extended to darkness and light. Black is the color of darkness, and white is the color of sunlight when the sun is fully risen and unobstructed.
- dlxxxiv Jesus is described as a lamb because He was sacrificed for us, just like lambs are sacrificial animals. Also, Jesus is gentle as a lamb in that He teaches us that we are permanently perfectly righteous and treats us accordingly. There are multiple references in Scripture to Jesus being a lamb or the Lamb of God, such as John 1:29,36.
- dlxxxv Revelation 21:4.

dlxxxvi Revelation 21:2,9.

dlxxxvii Revelation 21:11.

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dxciii The symbolism of Jesus' crucifixion as a bride price is implicit in Revelation chapter 21, and it is explicit in Ephesians 5:25-27.

dxciv Revelation 20:15.

dxcv Errico, Rocco A and George M. Lamsa. Aramaic Light on the Gospel of Matthew. Copyright 2000. p.77. Mr. Errico identifies the nature of spiritual suffering in the Biblical concept of Hell and its frequent association with fire.

dxcvi See also the sections titled "Why was the Law not Enough?," "Greater Righteousness," and "Death, Resurrection, and Ascension."

dxcvii Revelation 21:27 and 22:14-15.

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dxcix See the sections titled "The Name of God," "The Near Eastern Concept of Identity" and "Honor and Dishonor."

dc Musil, Alois. The Manners and Customs of the Rawa Bedouins. Copyright 1928. p.505-506. | Patai, Raphael. The Arab Mind. Copyright 1976. p.102. These authors describe how the Near Eastern perspective equates the color black with dishonor and the color white with honor. I would argue that the equations can be extended to darkness and light. Black is the color of darkness, and white is the color of sunlight when the sun is fully risen and unobstructed.

dci Jesus is described as a lamb because He was sacrificed for us, just like lambs are sacrificial animals. Also, Jesus is gentle as a lamb in that He teaches us that we are permanently perfectly righteous and treats us accordingly. There are multiple references in Scripture to Jesus being a lamb or the Lamb of God, such as John 1:29,36.

dcii Revelation 21:27.

dciii See the section titled "The Name of God."

dciv See Revelation 3:5 and 13:8 for the specification that it is a Christian's **name** that is written in the Lamb's book of life.

dcv Revelation 20:15.

dcvi Errico, Rocco A and George M. Lamsa. Aramaic Light on the Gospel of Matthew. Copyright 2000. p.77. Mr. Errico identifies the nature of spiritual suffering in the Biblical concept of Hell and its frequent association with fire.

dcvii Acts 13:46.

dcviii Emphasis is mine.

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dcx Genesis 3:24.

dcxi John 14:6.